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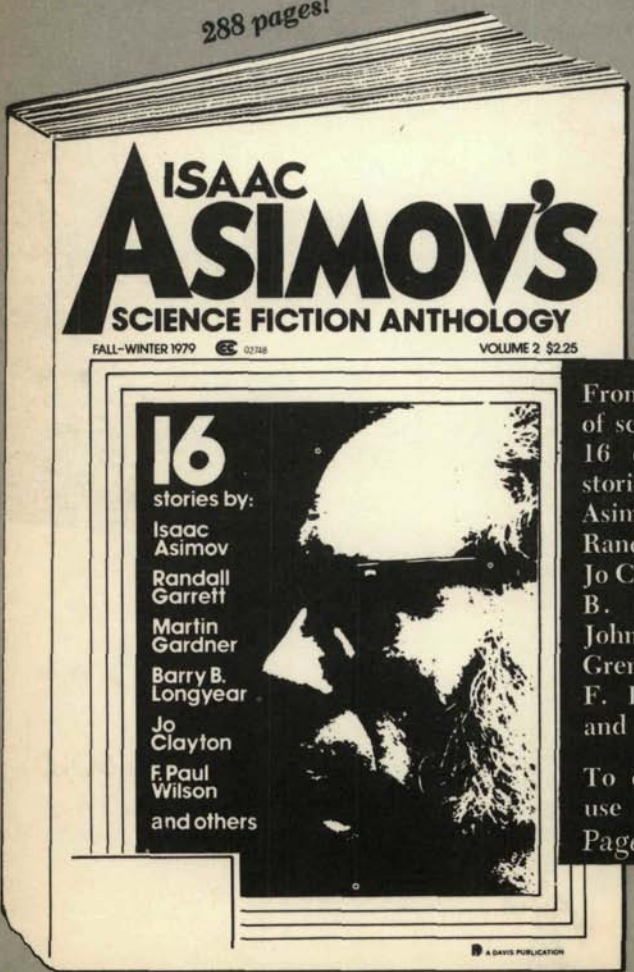

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EDITORIAL: THE SUN AND MOON

by Isaac Asimov

art: Frank Kelly Freas

I never lecture on any astronomical subject without becoming aware of the fuzziness on the part of the general public concerning the names of the various objects making up the Universe.

I don't really blame them. Astronomy isn't taught below the college level, and very few people learn astronomy on their own. The vast majority, therefore, get their knowledge of astronomical terminology from the newspapers, movies, or television which, on the whole, are rich sources of misinformation.

Thus, whenever someone asks me a question that includes the phrase "from another galaxy," I always counter with the question "What's a galaxy?" Invariably, the original questioner looks puzzled and sometimes aggrieved, as though only a cad and a bounder would ask that.

It's no disgrace to be unaware of such things if you are a member of the general public, but it isn't exactly an accolade, either. We, however, are not members of the general public. As science fiction readers and writers, we should know astronomical nomenclature.

Therefore, let's have a small discussion of it.

To the ancient Greeks, all the objects in the sky, every one of them without exception, was a star ("aster" in Greek). The stars fell into several categories, however. Most of them turned steadily about the sky while maintaining their relative positions, just as though the sky were a turning solid sphere (which is what the ancients thought it was, since they had nothing to judge by but appearances) with the stars fixed to it like luminous nail-heads. These, therefore, were the "fixed stars."

Some heavenly objects, however, shifted position against the background of the fixed stars; and these were called "wandering stars" (or, in Greek, "aster planetes," from which we get the English word "planet").

There were seven of these bodies known to the ancients: the Sun, the Moon, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn.

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With the coming of the Copernican system, it became apparent that the Sun was the center about which five of the planets—Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn—circled. It didn't make sense to label the Sun and the other bodies with the same name, since the Sun was huge, shining with its own light, and (as far as the early Copernicans could tell) fixed in space, while the other bodies were small, shone only by reflection, and moved about the Sun. The Sun, therefore, was no longer numbered among the planets.

It was recognized that the fixed stars were objects like the Sun, and that they appeared as mere points of light only because of their vast distance. There was no longer any need of an adjective to distinguish them from the planets. They became simply "stars," a term applied to any object in space that glowed by its own light over extended periods of time.

A question arises immediately. Can "suns" be used as a synonym for "stars"? It often is. In science fiction stories, an extraterrestrial might casually refer to "our sun" to distinguish it from the one that shines in Earth's sky. If a world circled a closely-spaced double-star and if we imagined intelligent beings on that world, they might fairly refer to "our suns."

That, however, introduces the possibility of confusion; and, ideally, language exists to eliminate confusion. It is preferable to use the word "star" generically, for all glowing bodies including our Sun, and to consider each of them as having (at least potentially) a name of its own in addition. In that case, the name of our particular star could be "Sun."

That doesn't quite wash, however. We call it "*the* Sun," and you virtually never see it without the definite article. Proper names don't carry definite articles unless you mean to imply that they are in some way unique. Speaking of *the* Sun is a form of home-chauvinism that dates back to the time when it was thought that the Sun was in actual fact unique.

It would be nice if we could therefore give the Sun a particular name. If it had one, then we could refer to those glowing objects as either stars or suns indiscriminately. In old-fashioned science-fiction stories, the Sun was sometimes referred to as "Sol," its Latin name. Personally, I would prefer "Helios," the Greek name.

Either, however, is a lost cause. No one is going to call the Sun anything but (in English) the Sun. It's chauvinistic to do so, but until there are extraterrestrials to raise objections, we will continue to do so. For clarity's sake, then, we should not use "sun" for any other star, but call them either stars or use a specific name.

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But what if a star has, as its only name, something like HD 348876+ in some star catalog? Well, if for some reason that very star must be used in a story, you can make up a name for it. Human beings have made up names for every conceivable feature they have come across, whether they are parts of the Earth, parts of the body, or parts or wholes of anything.

But back to the "wandering stars." Since five of these revolve about the Sun, it seemed natural to re-define "planet" as any non-luminous body that revolves about the Sun (or, by extension, about any star). Since, by Copernican notions, the Earth, too, revolved about the Sun, the Earth, too, became a planet.

This meant there were six planets: Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn; listed in the order of distance from the Sun. (Other, still farther, planets were eventually discovered.)

But what about the Moon? It revolved about the Sun, too, but only secondarily. It revolved about the Earth and accompanied the Earth on the latter's voyage about the Sun.

Strictly speaking, the Earth and Moon revolve about a common center of gravity and it is this center of gravity that follows a smooth ellipse about the Sun. The Earth, however, is 81 times as massive as the Moon; and the center of gravity is less than 5,000 kilometers from the center of the Earth. It's a reasonable approximation, therefore, to suppose the Moon to be moving about a relatively unmoving Earth.

Since the Moon revolves about the Earth, primarily, rather than directly about the Sun, it is no longer included in the list of planets.

In January 1610, Galileo discovered that there were four small objects circling Jupiter in very much the fashion that the Moon circled the Earth. The Moon, therefore, turned out not to be a unique case. At once, I imagine, people began to speak of "the moons of Jupiter" and they still do. In 1957, I published a book, *Lucky Starr and the Moons of Jupiter*.

That leaves room for confusion, however. If all these bodies are to be known as moons, and each also has a proper name of its own, then *our* Moon ought to have a name of its own. It could be called Luna from the Latin, or Selene from the Greek.

However, it won't be. It's going to be called "*the* Moon," with Earthly chauvinism; and therefore the name ought not be used for any other object.

Shortly after Galileo discovered the bodies circling Jupiter, Johann Kepler termed them "satellites," a Latin expression meaning "attendants."

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This is the proper general term. We can speak of "the satellites of Jupiter" or of any other planet, where a satellite is any non-luminous body circling a substantially larger non-luminous body. The Moon, in that sense, is Earth's satellite.

If you want to refer to the body about which a particular satellite turns without naming it, you can speak of "the planet that Ganymede revolves about," which is very clumsy. You can take advantage of English's tendency to become telegraphic by speaking of "Ganymede's planet." That would be completely confusing, however. Jupiter is a planet of the Sun; that's clear. To say it is the planet of Ganymede is to use "planet" in two precisely opposite ways.

It is better to speak of a satellite's "primary" (from the Latin for "first"). Primary is a perfectly general word, which can be used for the larger of any two bodies that circle each other. Jupiter is Ganymede's primary. The Sun is the Earth's primary. The more massive of a double star system (or the brighter, if we don't know the masses) is the primary of that system, and so on.

But there goes my allotted space. I'll continue this discussion next month.

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ON BOOKS
by Baird Searles

An Infinite Summer by Christopher Priest, Scribners, $8.95.
The Book of the Dun Cow by Walter Wangerin, Jr., Pocket Books, $2.50 (paper).
Charisma by Michael G. Coney, Dell, $1.95 (paper).
The Stars Are the Styx by Theodore Sturgeon, Dell, $2.25 (paper).
E Pluribus Unicorn by Theodore Sturgeon, Pocket Books, $1.95 (paper).
Beyond by Theodore Sturgeon, Dell, $1.95 (paper).
Venus Plus X by Theodore Sturgeon, Dell, $1.95 (paper).
Wall of Serpents by L. Sprague de Camp and Fletcher Pratt, Dell, $1.95 (paper).
Earthman's Burden by Poul Anderson and Gordon R. Dickson, Avon, $1.75 (paper).
Barlowe's Guide to Extraterrestrials by Wayne Douglas Barlowe and Ian Summers, Workman, $14.95 (cloth), $7.95 (paper).

As we enter the '80s, science fiction seems to be quietly dividing itself into two camps which are not necessarily antagonistic. This is rather a relief after that acrimonious division of a decade ago when the field developed an avant garde, and there was a good deal of screaming and yelling between the "old wave" and the "new wave." (How typical that no original terms could be found and these had to be borrowed from cinema.)

I have no handy dandy terms for the new divisions, which is probably just as well; they do, however, involve the old and the new, or at least the traditional and untraditional. Traditional science fiction has its roots in the pulp-magazine, action/adventure story, in America at least. This is not meant as a negative judgement, and the key word there is *story*. There are some, myself included, who regard SF as the last refuge of the good, old fashioned story, with a beginning, middle, and end, a plot, and a resolution.

As science fiction became more popular in the 1960s, and more respectable, there began to emerge young writers, unafraid of the stigma of being a *science fiction writer,* who were concerned with writing as an art rather than a craft. (Those writers of the pulp magazines who could toss off a satisfactory novel in a week were certainly expert craftsmen, particularly at the 2¢ a word that they

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were usually paid.) These "new" writers—there were certainly precedents in the field as far back as the early Bradbury—have been giving us works that are evocative, connotative, and short on plot; more realistic in a way since, like life itself, there are events but no real resolutions; less realistic in another way since there is little or no reliance on the coherence and internal logic with which the traditional SF writer convinces the reader of the reality of the unreal.

This dichotomy obviously is a descendant of the "old wave"/"new wave" furor, but those terms certainly no longer apply. And whatever the labels, there are on both sides more maturity, skill, and mutual respect, some overlap, and less experimental garbage.

Christopher Priest, with the five stories in *An Infinite Summer*, is a prime exponent of the untraditional mode. He takes the stuff of classic science fiction—time travel, new weapons, an alien culture—and weaves them into what are situations more than stories. Three of the five take place in a common locale, a world of a northern continent and a southern continent, which have been involved in war for several hundreds of years. Between them lies the Dream Archipelago (a sort of wet Vermilion Sands) where two of the stories (or situations) are set.

The title story and "Palely Loitering" are concerned with time. In one, travelers from the future invade our time and "freeze" certain situations as (perhaps) *objets d'art*. In the other, there is a park with a "Flux Channel" across which are three bridges, to the past, present, and future.

Readers in search of full-bodied plots, clear explanations, and satisfying denouements are warned to stay clear. But if it's evocative writing and oddly oblique variations on science fictional themes that turn you on, *An Infinite Summer* might well be what you're looking for.

Something of the same split applies, in another key as it were, in fantasy. There is "realistic" fantasy (Tolkien, McKillip, et al.) and "unrealistic" fantasy, such as allegories and fables. *The Book of the Dun Cow* by Walter Wangerin, Jr. is a fable; it concerns sentient animals acting out a morality tale with religious overtones. It is a direct descendant of those stories of Aesop.

The novel centers on the epic struggle between the rooster Chaunticleer and his enemies, Cockatrice and his children, the basilisks. Chaunticleer is the ruler of his own small kingdom of beasts; Cockatrice was hatched from a rooster's egg brooded by a toad, but is in

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reality the spawn of Wyrm, the ultimate evil that lives in the earth.

Given the limitations of this form, which is hardly everybody's cup of tea, *The Book of the Dun Cow* contains a goodly amount of excitement and pathos. Thank God, it almost never descends to the cute, and the humor here is rather engagingly off the wall. One of the minor characters is named Corningware Turkey; and there is a dog, very reminscent of those in early Walt Kelly comic strips, who goes on at such length about his faults and woes that no one else can get a word in edgewise. His name, I regret to say, is Mundo Cani.

If you can stomach this sort of thing, you'll probably find *The Book of the Dun Cow* diverting, if hardly deserving of the praise lavished on it by critics on its hard cover publication. I suppose that only goes to show what mainstream critics want of fantasy.

A month or so back, I remarked that the alternate time track story was a fairly rare breed. Naturally, since then there have been several, a plot on the part of publishers to make me look foolish, of course. The latest is Michael G. Coney's *Charisma,* and it's an unusual variation on the theme. The heart of it is a good, old fashioned murder mystery that takes place in an English seaside town. The victim is a Mr. Moneybags type whom more than a few people had motives for killing, including the first-person narrator that we know didn't do it because we have been with him throughout. BUT . . . throw in some alternate time lines with instant access to them, thanks to a research group working thereabouts; and add the fact that these lines are almost duplicates of ours, but with a day or so lapse in time. This means you have several versions of victim and suspects *all* running around loose. What a stew!

So far as I can figure out, Mr. Coney has handled the complexities of this very neatly; *Charisma* is an intelligent puzzler that should appeal to mystery and science fiction readers both.

Why Theodore Sturgeon is a master story teller (if not *the* master story teller) is one of those mysteries of genius that I'm not about to tackle. Just take my word for it and check me out by reading the new Sturgeon collection, *The Stars Are the Styx.* Now this is a new collection, *not* a collection of new stories; but even old Sturgeon hands might find fresh material here. Almost all of these stories, which date from 1950 to 1971 with the majority from the '50s, have only appeared in one or two long-out-of-print anthologies. The only one I remember encountering before is "Rule of Three," an early

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exercise of a persistent Sturgeon theme, that of uniting human beings into a whole greater than the parts (other examples of which are "The Skills of Xanadu," perhaps my favorite Sturgeon short story, and his novel *More Than Human,* a universaly acknowledged classic). Others included here are "Tandy's Story," in which it is shown that little girls are not only made of sugar and spice and everything nice, but may have some other alien factors in their makeup; and the title story about a millennia-long project to send humanity to the stars and its effect on some of those involved.

Five years ago, there was almost no Sturgeon in print, a disgraceful state of affairs which has since been remedied with more and more of his work becoming available. Again with us are two collections, *E Pluribus Unicorn* and *Beyond.* The former is perhaps the most famous of Sturgeon collections; the title refers to "The Silken-Swift," the loveliest of stories about the unicorn. In the latter is the short novel "Need," which so far as I know has been nowhere available but in this long-out-of-print book.

Sturgeon's novel, *Venus Plus X,* has also been unavailable for a long time. It's a 1960 work, part of a loose-knit series in which Sturgeon explored various aspects of human sexuality at a time when science fiction was just getting to the point of admitting there was such a thing.

Venus Plus X is a study of a society of physically bisexual humans, with a running subplot contrasting the sexual roles of contemporary culture (contemporary as of 1960, that is—alas, it hasn't changed that much). This gives the novel a little more of a studiedly polemical quality than is usual in Sturgeon, but it's still a fascinating work. Comparison with Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*—which was to set SF on its ear nine years after the publication of *Venus Plus X* with a handling of much the same subject—is inevitable, but certainly unfair to both writers. The Le Guin is probably the more effective, but the Sturgeon did predate it by almost a decade and has its own highly individual viewpoint.

Before getting into *Wall of Serpents,* let's try to straighten out this whole Harold Shea, *Incomplete Enchanter, Compleat Enchanter* mess as a public service, shall we? L. Sprague de Camp and Fletcher Pratt's hero, Harold Shea, who has discovered a method of reaching any number of possible worlds by use of the sorites of symbolic logic (his "syllagismobile"), first appears in the book, *The Incomplete Enchanter.* In it he enters the worlds of Norse myth and Spenser's *Faerie Queen* (two separate novelettes on their initial magazine

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publication, but don't let's confuse the issue with *that*). The sequel, concerning the world of Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso,* was called *The Castle of Iron;* these two, *The Incomplete Enchanter* and *The Castle of Iron,* were published in one volume a few years back under the title of *The Compleat Enchanter.* Are you with me so far?

Two subsequent novelettes concerning Shea's further adventures, "Wall of Serpents" and "The Green Magician," had to do with the worlds of the Finnish *Kalevala* and Irish myth respectively. These two were published a couple of decades back in a small hard-cover edition under the title *Wall of Serpents,* now a collector's item. There has been a recent hard cover edition of the same material; the novelette "Wall of Serpents" has appeared in a briefly-in-print collection; but to my knowledge, "The Green Magician" has not, up to now, been available in paperback.

Which it is now, in the *Wall of Serpents* book form; and was it worth all that? Well, pretty much so, considering that the whole series really relies on two jokes. One is the culture clash between more or less contemporary Americans and the inhabitants of these various mythical, fictional worlds; the other is the unpredictable and generally amusing results that Shea gets when he attempts the magics of the various worlds without knowing all the rules. *Castle of Iron* bogged down because of length; these last two adventures come close to the jaunty spirit of the original, and are good, light reading.

So, certainly, is *Earthman's Burden* by Poul Anderson and Gordon R. Dickson which is, like the Harold Shea stories, one of science fiction's rare excursions into palatable humor. If you don't know these stories about that lovable extraterrestrial race called Hokas, make it your business to.

Hokas live on an Earth-type planet, and for sheer adorableness, have even Piper's Fuzzies beat all to hell—they look like animated Teddy bears. They are intelligent, but above all, they are adaptable—adaptable and so subject to fads and influences as to make a human teenager seem like a member of the Vatican Curia.

So when a human exploration ship arrives, and in the process of logging the planet, shows some old Western movies to the staff which the Hokas also take in; and when a member of the crew leaves behind some Western magazines, voila!—Hoka country becomes Marlboro country; the Hokas create a working, if slightly out-of-synch, Old West.

No need to say what happens when the Hokas are exposed to

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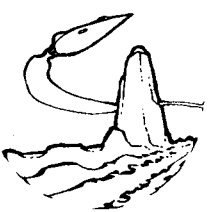
Sherlock Holmes, *Don Giovanni,* or space opera. The results are predictably chaotic and usually pretty funny, particularly if taken one story at a time.

So welcome back into print, Hokas all, and three cheers that this new printing has the enchanting Cartier illustrations that have accompanied earlier editions of your book.

Speaking of illustrations, we finally have an SF "art book" with a point beyond its artwork—a literary point, in fact. To put it more clearly, the book devoted to Wayne Barlowe's work called *Barlowe's Guide to Extraterrestrials* is not just a book of random paintings and drawings, but an illustrated "field guide" to great aliens of history—SF history, that is. It's a dandy idea, artfully (as it were) realized.

Here we have full-page, colored portraits of a Vegan from Heinlein's *Have Spacesuit, Will Travel;* a Puppeteer from Niven's *Neutron Star* (et al); an Overlord from Clarke's *Childhood's End* (particularly handsome); an Old One from Lovecraft's Cthulhu mythos, and many others. On the facing page are subsidiary drawings (physiological details, life-cycle stages, etc.) and a concise, clearly-written text on characteristics, habitat, culture, and other matters of interest. There's also a delightful working sketchbook section, and a pullout comparative-size chart with a self portrait by Mr. Barlowe setting the human scale.

My only complaint (a mild but inevitable one) is that a couple of my favorite aliens were left out (nothing from Stapledon, for instance). Aside from that, it's an ownable book, picturing some of your favorite ETs for you with great accuracy, and maybe leading you to make the acquaintance of some unearthly characters that you'll want to know better.



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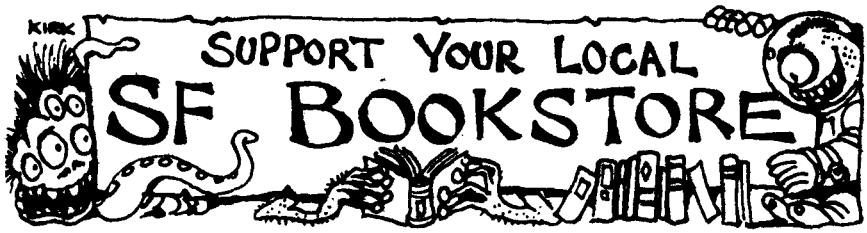

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DARKMORNING

by Sydney J. Van Scyoc

art: Ron Miller

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The author reports the family's now moved into a place a bit more out in the country—her new office is a converted dairy shed on the property.

Glowing stems of stalk lamp threw diffuse light against the stone wall, dimly illuminating the sleeping chamber. Tima had pulled on her leggings and was about to slip into her boots when her father appeared in the doorway that separated their family quarters from the common hall. "Are you ready?"

"I'm almost dressed," she said, alerted by the unexpected tension in his voice. "Andris is meeting me at the west door as soon as he feeds the ewes." Dim shapes glided through the hall beyond the doorway, hall residents preparing for Darkmorning. Although Terlath's slopes were bare, snow already capped peaks to the north and east of the community. Soon winter blizzards would move into the valley, burying the community's long stone halls.

Tima's father stepped forward, grey eyes frowning. "Andris is staying here. Pili will go up the mountain with you instead."

Tima looked up in surprise. "Pili? Pili can't come up the mountain. She isn't ready for Darkmorning. She—"

He shook his head, silencing her. "I took the matter to Juris Nordin as soon as Pili's uncle told me Pili insisted upon taking Andris's place. I hoped Juris would refuse her. But it's Pili's family pasture you will harvest and Pili insists upon going."

"But she shouldn't leave the hall so near Darkmorning," Tima protested. "The only reason there are reeds left in their pasture is because she ran away to the peaks this summer. If her family hadn't had to repay the searchers' time, they could have harvested reeds when everyone else did."

Again her father shook his head. "It was Juris's decision, Tima."

And Juris's judgement was not open to question. Frowning, Tima slid her feet into her boots. The trip would take three days: one to climb the mountain, a second to harvest the vexreeds, a third to return. Three days with Pili . . . "What if she runs away again?"

Her father sighed. "I've made it clear to Juris and to Pili's uncle that if she does, you will not follow. You are simply to return to the hall and direct searchers after her. Will you do that?"

She shivered, realizing his misgivings equalled her own. "Yes, of course I'll—yes."

"Good. Do that and no more." He stepped back, shadow closing across his features. "Pili will meet you at the west door with both

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ration packs. And when you return, we will all be that much nearer."

"That much nearer the time," she responded automatically.

Briefly he smiled, a shadowy manifestation of approval. Then he was gone.

Alone, she stared bleakly at her boots. Three days on the mountain with Pili, Pili whose two older sisters had died in the winter sleep, Pili whose moods were erratic, whose family seemed helpless to discipline or control her.

At fifteen Pili should not have required discipline or control. Even now, so many centuries after their ancestors had been stranded on Brakrath, survival was a matter of unstinting cooperation. Everyone was expected to contribute to the communal welfare.

In Pili's case, that expectation had been waived.

Frowning, Tima slipped into her jacket and tied her hood over her coiled braids. She was of medium height, with dense white hair and grey eyes. With Darkmorning only days away, her body was sleek with winter reserves. By spring she would be slender again, even slight.

She slipped into the hall. Shadowed figures hurried past, intent upon preparations for the winter sleep. Occasionally Tima glimpsed indistinct shapes swaddled in their beds, individuals whose winter fat reserves were dangerously low. Their families sent them to bed early and fed them on rich foods, hoping to add saving ounces of fat to their reserves.

"Nearer; when we wake we will be that much nearer." The ritual words whispered through the hall. No one entered the winter sleep without reminding every friend, every kinsman of the ultimate deliverance.

Nearer the time. Tima shuddered. Brakrath was a harsh world. The soil was stony, the growing and grazing seasons short. Fortunately their ancestors had discovered that sleepleaf, gathered from woody thickets on Terlath's western slope, dried, powdered, then sprinkled through the hall at Darkmorning, induced a profound winter-long sleep that conserved precious food stores. As a child Tima had looked forward to Darkmorning Eve, to the feasting and dancing, to the singing, finally to the parting whispers as the families withdrew to their separate quarters. Even the final moments of consciousness, as the sharp scent of the powdered leaf filled the air, were precious; when they woke, the time might already have come. The ships might wait outside the halls to deliver them from Brakrath's cold purgatory.

But Tima was fifteen now. She had wakened too many times stiff,

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weak, and hungry to find the miracle unfulfilled. Darkmorning had lost its magic, and had become instead a period of dark dreams and alien voices, siren voices some said came from the rocky strata of Brakrath itself. Tima peered into passing faces, trying to find her own fears mirrored there. But the people who hurried through the hall inclined their heads in the ritual greeting. There was no one to whom Tima dared voice her growing unease. "Nearer," she whispered, hurrying from the hall.

The sun was a pale circlet perched upon Terlath's black shoulder. The herds stirred restlessly, their dark, silken outer coats underlain with a dense white winter coat. Individual animals jostled each other jealously to rub their foreheads against their herders' booted feet, marking them with tiny scent glands located just beneath their shaggy ears.

Tima paused, peering up the mountain. The dark rock was impassive under frowning grey skies. Quickly she pulled on her mittens and tightened her hood.

Pili perched on a boulder nearby, her thin face bleak. When she saw Tima, her features contracted pettishly. "I thought we were leaving early."

Tima repressed a sharp response. Despite Pili's petulant expression, something old lived in her eyes, something driven, something Tima had never seen there before. "We have plenty of time. Did you bring the ration packs?"

Scorn gave Pili's voice a biting edge. "Do you think my aunt would send me without them?" She retrieved two bulging pouches from behind the boulder.

Tima weighed hers doubtfully. They would hardly need so much. Even this late in the year they could pick shellberries along the way and at night they could brew up soup thistles. But she recognized the intent behind the stuffed pouches. Pili was painfully thin and Darkmorning was just five days away. Frowning, Tima slung her pouch over one shoulder. "Nearer," she said automatically, leading the way.

The moutain's lower slope was a series of gradual inclines cut by well-defined paths. Pili struggled to match Tima's pace, breathing unevenly, constantly pushing back her unbraided hair. "You don't have to slow down for me," she said finally, caustically, when Tima paused for her to catch up. "I know the trails."

The contrast between the venom of her words and the hidden, haunted quality of her gaze made Tima hesitate. "We have plenty of time."

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Pili shook her head irritably. "And you don't have to pretend you want my company. I know your father asked Juris to intercede. But she didn't. No one can keep me from going to my family's pasture. And I can find it without you."

Tima bit back a tart response. "My father was worried about the weather. You don't have as much mountain experience as Andris."

"Well, if it storms, you can leave me behind. And you can leave me behind if it doesn't. I don't care."

Frowning, Tima repressed a second biting response. "We probably should eat now anyway." This near Darkmorning it was customary to make half a dozen small meals each day as well as the large evening meal.

Pili's entire body rigidified. "Maybe it's time for you to eat!" she said, a hysterical edge to her voice. "Maybe *you* should eat!" Then she plunged blindly up the trail, her hood sliding down, the wind catching her thin brown hair.

Tima stared after her. Then, perplexed, she slipped behind the rocks and opened her pack.

It was midday when she overtook Pili. The other girl knelt before a thicket of shellberries, her eyes squeezed shut. She stuffed berries into her mouth with purple-stained hands, choking, gorging herself.

Tima hesitated. As she slipped past Pili, her foot accidentally sent a loose rock skittering down the path. Pili leapt to her feet. For a moment their eyes met, Tima's stricken, Pili's blank, staring. Then Pili slapped a hand to her mouth, and as Tima turned and ran up the trail, she heard the unmistakable sound of Pili retching.

The ascent grew steeper, the sky more leaden. Tima kept watch for Pili on the path below and for predators. Crag-chargers, bree-terlik, rock leopards, snowminx—at this time of year they hunted by day as well as by night.

They reached Pili's family pasture at dusk. When they entered the tiny stone cabin, the eerie glow of overgrown stalk lamp hollowed Pili's cheeks and filled the bowls of her eyes with orange light. Tima peered around. Everything seemed to be in order. "I'll fetch thistles for soup if you'll bring water."

Pili turned, her body rigid. "I'm not going to eat."

Tima set down her pack, frowning. The cabin was small, too small for hostility. "Pili, if I said something wrong—"

"You don't even know what you said!" An icy wind caught Pili's hair and flung it across her pinched features. Yanking off her mittens, she tore at her hipjacket, discarding it. She struggled out of her thickly padded vest and under-vest, displaying her gaunt body.

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"*Eat*—that's all anyone says to me. Eat, Pili. Fatten for the sleep. Eat your nutpaste, drink your cream, don't forget your bread and cheese.

"Well, I've eaten. I've eaten everything they put in front of me. I choke it down and when I vomit it up, they make me eat more. And it does me just as much good as it did my sisters!"

Stunned, Tima tongued her dry lips. Without padded garments, the starved gauntness of her body told the story clearly. Pili had eaten but her body had failed to build the crucial fat reserves. Darkmorning had never found her sleek; spring had never found her strong. This year she was thinner than ever before.

Painfully thin.

Deathly thin.

"Maybe if you had stayed at the hall and swaddled early—"

"No! Wesha let them put her to bed early last year. And Baka let them put her to bed early the year she died. They both ate and they both swaddled early."

And both were dead now. Three sisters, two dead in the winter sleep. Tima's hands clutched helplessly. "I'll go find the spring." Their drinking skins needed refilling even if she did not brew soup. Breaking off a limb of stalk lamp, she left the cabin.

When she returned, Pili had fallen into an exhausted sleep. Tima kindled a fire, then opened her pack and ate. Soon she slept too.

When she woke sometime later, Pili sat in a heap of discarded bedding, gorging herself from her pack, choking food down as quickly as she could stuff it into her mouth. Tima squeezed her eyes shut, waiting tensely for the sound of retching.

It didn't come. Eventually she slept again.

Night had reached its lowest ebb when Tima woke again to find the cabin door standing open and Pili's bedding abandoned. Alarmed, Tima pulled on her jacket and boots. The night was clear, brilliant with stars, but the air was bitter cold. Stepping outside, Tima peered up the dark mountain. If Pili had run away to the peaks, with night-predators hunting the slopes—impulsively, Tima rejected caution and ran up the stony path.

She almost passed Pili's hiding place without seeing the other girl. Pili huddled at the shadowy lee of a tall boulder, her thin hair streaming across her shoulders, her features blue with cold. Tima halted, her initial alarm turning to anger. "What are you doing outside?"

"What do you care?" The fear that had haunted Pili's eyes by day possessed them totally now. "I'm not going back inside. I'm not going

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to wind up in my blankets and die!" Abruptly she was on her feet, bare fists clenched at her sides. "They brought me back last summer. They found me and brought me back when I went to the peaks—because I didn't know where to hide. Well, I've been sitting at the herders' table every night since then, and now I know where to hide! I know all the secret places, the caverns and the holes. I know—"

"You know all the places where the searchers will look first!" Tima said sharply. "Who do you think Juris calls up when she needs a search party? The herders."

Pili's mouth gaped, then snapped shut. "Maybe they know the places I've heard them talk about. But there are other places. They can't search them all before Darkmorning. You'll need one day to get back to the hall. They'll need another to reach the grass line. By then—"

"By then you'll be dead of exposure. Or one of the ewe-killers will have you," Tima said flatly, trying to counter the other girl's hysteria.

"Well, I don't care!" Pili's chattering teeth broke the protest into a stammer. "I don't care if I'm eaten by a rock leopard or a breeterlik or a charger! And I heard one from the south peaks. *I heard one*!"

"You heard a charger?" Tima's mouth was suddenly dry. Pili's family pasture was one of the last below the grass line. There were charger caverns little more than two hours brisk climb up the mountain.

Two hours brisk climb for Tima, for Pili. A charger would cover the distance much more rapidly, barreling down the less steeply inclined trails on stubby legs, then retracting limbs and head into its armored casing and rolling, tumbling, and bumping down the steeper inclines. "When—when did you hear it?"

Pili shrank behind the bony fortress of her hunched shoulders. "It—I don't know! I was walking up the trail. I was going to get to the grass line before you woke. I was climbing—then I heard the charger. I stopped and listened and I didn't hear rock sliding. So I went ahead—until it bellowed again."

"How near?"

"I couldn't tell." She shivered involuntarily, then narrowed her eyes in defiance. "And I don't care if it gets me! *I don't care*!"

Then why were you hiding in the rocks? Tima wondered. "Well, I care if it gets me. You left me asleep with the door wide open."

A shadow of contrition touched Pili's pinched features. She dismissed it immediately. "Then why don't you go back and lock yourself in?"

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Tima hesitated. Despite her bitter defiance, Pili had huddled in the rocks like a frightened child. Her voice carefully level, she said, "That's what I'm going to do. I'm going to lock myself in." Stiffly, she turned back down the trail. The night was silent behind her, hollow.

She had just reached the cabin door when Pili caught up with her. "No! Don't lock me out! *Tima*!"

"I won't," Tima said wearily and let Pili stumble past her into the cabin. When Tima closed the door, Phili's harsh breath turned to painful sobs. Tima pulled off her boots and crawled back into bed. Even after Pili's sobs died, Tima lay tensely awake.

The next morning Pili followed Tima outside silently. Vexreed grew in dense clumps in the deserted pasture. If the reeds were harvested and tied immediately into bundles, a single person could carry half a dozen large bundles piled on her back. When carefully bound reeds were untied and dropped between the double walls of the herd sheds, they burst almost immediately, yielding a dense white foam that hardened upon contact with air. The hardened foam provided valuable insulation against bitter winter winds.

Tima and Pili left their packs near the cabin and spread their binding cloths. They worked silently. Tima glanced uneasily at the sky as she worked. Last night had been clear, but the sun was entirely hidden by cloud today, and the air held a damp, penetrating chill.

They had bound their first bundle when Tima glanced up to find Pili staring toward the cabin, her face ashen.

Tima turned to see a snowminx slip silently toward the cabin. The animal moved with elastic grace, its silken white fur falling in long, loose ringlets. Its eyes were vividly pink, savage. Moving upright, it glided toward their abandoned packs. Glaring around, the minx quickly ripped open the first pack. Its pink nostrils quivered hungrily.

Without thinking, Tima stepped forward, one hand raised. Pili caught her arm. "*No*! Don't move."

Tima froze, flushing. A three-year-old knew that to move when a snowminx came near was to invite swift-clawing death. Only the minx's preoccupation with the packs had saved her.

She knew equally well that snowminx did not venture from their dens by day unless snowfall was imminent. She peered up at the dense clouds. Would snow catch them before they could reach the hall? Catch them on the mountain without rations?

Because the snowminx had already devoured the contents of the

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first pack and was clawing at the second. Tima and Pili held their places, barely breathing. When the minx had ravaged the second pack, it approached them with a hopping glide, ringlets bobbing.

Its pink eyes peered at first one, then the other. Baring double rows of teeth, it touched Tima's cheek with a single claw. When she did not flinch, the animal crooned and grew very still. It probed Pili's face with the same claw, drawing a single drop of blood. Perspiration stood cold on Tima's face. If Pili drew back as the minx probed almost tenderly at her face again, its claws describing a long, bleeding track down one cheek . . .

But Pili remained still, her face grey. After an interminable interval, the animal abruptly lost interest and bounded away. As it disappeared across the pasture, Tima began to tremble violently. "We— if we start down now, before the snow comes—"

Pili gazed at the snow-heavy clouds, apparently oblivious to the blood drying on her cheek. "I'm not going down."

"But if we're caught here without rations —"

"It won't snow for days," Pili said, the words defiant. "My uncle says the minx come out every year just before Darkmorning. Sometimes they come out days before it snows. It doesn't mean anything."

Tima bit back an instinctive rebuttal. They both knew Pili was lying. But the community herds had made an unexpected increase this summer and two new sheds had been erected. If they did not harvest reeds to insulate the double-walls of the new sheds, the surplus animals would have to be slaughtered and processed before Darkmorning and the community would lose the small advantage it had gained.

Perhaps the snow would be light. Unconsciously Tima nodded and some of the tension left Pili's hunched shoulders. She fell quickly to work. Tima bit her lower lip, uncomfortable with her unspoken decision.

By midday they had bound half a dozen bundles. And at midday snow curled its first wind-swept fingers across the pasture. Studying the sky, ignoring the instinct that urged her to start down the trail immediately, Tima rolled out a seventh binding cloth.

By the time they had bound their tenth bundle, snow veiled the mountainside. "We're only two bundles short," Tima said above the rising furor of the wind. "If you'll help me load—"

Rebellion played across Pili's features. But the harsh wind tore at her hair and defiance died as quickly as it had flared.

They picked their way cautiously down the trail, their feet slipping on new snow, the wind skirling around them with growing

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fury. They passed two deserted cabins before Tima knew they could go no farther. When she glimpsed the snow-veiled silhouette of a third cabin, she beckoned to Pili to follow.

Dropping the bundled reeds, they entered the tiny cabin and pressed the door shut. Overgrown stalk lamp lit the cabin garishly. The bitter wind reached through the poorly chinked walls, spitting snow across the floor. Pili peered blank-faced at Tima, her lips blue. "We'll freeze here."

Tima followed her gaze. "We should have stopped at Bersh's cabin or Wendell's," she realized sinkingly. This was Arah's cabin. Arah's family herd had been ravaged by a crag-charger three summers before. The family had abandoned its cabin, leaving nothing behind. There was neither a tinderbox to spark and catch fire nor fuel to feed it. "We'll have to open one of the bundles and use the reeds for bedding. We can stack the other bundles around the walls to block out the wind."

Pili stared at her with empty-eyed dispassion, then crouched motionless on the cold hearth as Tima dragged the bulky bundles of reeds into the cabin and piled them around the walls. Tima unbound one bundle and arranged the reeds in a loose nest. The reeds split and began to foam almost immediately. "We'd better shape our bed."

Pili cooperated dully. Together they compressed the foaming reeds to fit their bodies. Tima shifted once, enlarging her cavity. Gradually their contained body heat brought feeling back to her wind-bitten cheeks. She closed her eyes and fell quickly into an exhausted sleep.

When she woke, she fought a moment's disorientation. The wind no longer shrieked around the cabin and Pili sat motionless in her hollow, tears running down her thin cheeks. Sitting up, Tima experienced a quick rush of compassion. Then she saw what the other girl held in the palm of one hand. "Pili—"

Pili met Tima's eyes, her dilated pupils bottomless. "You don't think I'll swallow them. Do you?" Her rising voice rendered the demand more frightened than defiant.

"I—"

"Do you? You think I'm afraid to swallow them."

"No, I—I know you're not afraid," Tima said quickly. "I just—I don't understand where you found savona seed at this time of year." When the blue savona that dotted the upper mountainside went to seed at mid-summer, the seeds were quickly gathered by small native foragers. Yet Pili held dozens of the poisonous black pellets in one palm.

Pili sighed tremulously, surrendering her bleak attempt at defi-

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ance. "I've had them since last summer."

"You harvested them when—"

"When I ran away from the herd. I thought some night I could do it. I thought some night I could swallow them." Her mouth twisted bitterly. "Just like I thought I could run away to the crags last night. I thought it would be worse to go back to the cabin with you than to be alone on the mountain.

"But it wasn't. And today when the minx touched me, all I had to do was raise one hand—like you did before you froze—and the minx would have torn me to pieces. But I couldn't. I couldn't move my arm, I couldn't turn my head, I couldn't even raise my eyebrows. And that would have been enough."

Enough to send the minx into a killing fury. "Pili, you—"

"I don't want to lie in my bed on Darkmorning and wonder how I'll know when I'm dead. I don't want to die in my bed."

For a moment Tima knew Pili's fear, knew it totally; knew the chilling dread of lying half-conscious while life receded and the dreams came, the long winter dreams filled with half-apprehended images and with voices that were never heard waking. Some believed the Brakrath powers came into the stonehalls at Darkmorning, powers as old as Terlath's cragged peaks, powers which revealed themselves to humans only when they lay drugged and helpless.

Tima shuddered. Others said the dreams were stimulated by sleepleaf. But if the dreams came from the leaf and the leaf came from the soil, and if the soil was inhabited by silent powers—

"You want to kill yourself," she heard herself say.

And Pili said, 'Yes." A dry whisper: "Yes."

She wanted to kill herself but she was afraid of the mountain predators, afraid of the freezing cold, afraid of the convulsing agony of savona.

"You want to die—but not in your bed."

Pili seemed about to whisper a second affirmative. But a frown touched her face. "*No.* No, I—"

"You don't want to die," Tima realized hollowly. No one wanted to die. Impulsively she said, "Pili, our families will send searchers. When they realize we're snowed in, they'll—"

Pili shook her head. "*No.* No."

"But they will."

Pili drew a sobbing breath, then leaned forward, grimacing with sudden malice. "Why should they? I know about the training you and Andris took with Juris Nordin last spring. My uncle says it's impossible to control your sleep state without the leaf. But Manda

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showed me how she could put herself into a deep sleep just by doing what Juris taught her year before last—by controlling her breathing. And you learned how to do it too. You can sleep here all winter. You don't need sleepleaf to do it."

"I—don't," Tima admitted haltingly. "I can reach a deep sleep without the leaf, deep enough to stretch my reserves. But I can't teach you to do it, not quickly enough."

"What good would it do if you could?" Pili demanded bitterly. "I don't *have* reserves. I'll be dead by spring wherever I sleep. And you'll be alive. So why should Juris send searchers?"

Tima stared at the other girl. "You—you don't know that. People wake every spring who weren't expected to. If the minx hadn't eaten our rations—"

"They might have kept me alive for a week or two."

And after that a slow, fading death. Despite Pili's physical fragility, Tima knew the other girl's metabolic requirements were substantially higher than her own. "Pili, if I could do something—"

"But you can't. Can you?" Pili's eyes sparkled with sudden hatred. "You can't set aside food for us to eat through the winter and a hall that isn't scattered with sleepleaf. Can you? You know we're going to die if we sleep—but you sprinkle the leaf anyway and in the spring you mourn us. For a few days, while you're preparing for Brightmorning feast. Then you forget us."

Tima recoiled. Was this what underlay Pili's willfulness, her defiance: hatred? "I—we don't forget."

"Then why don't you feed us? You can tell we aren't fit for Darkmorning. Why don't you give us a hall of our own and winter rations when you know we'll die without them?" Her eyes were bright with hostility.

"That—that's how we almost died before we discovered sleepleaf," Tima faltered. "We can't raise enough food to feed everyone through the winter at a waking metabolic rate. The soil is too thin. The growing season—"

"Did I say everyone?"

"You—no one likes the winter sleep. No one wants the dreams, the voices," Tima insisted. "If Juris had to decide every autumn who was to sleep and who wasn't—And if the people who stayed awake ate too much—" The food stores were painstakingly managed, every micro-weight of grain, every tot of milk carefully allotted. There was no surplus.

"Then it would be your turn to starve, wouldn't it?"

Her turn to die the death that stalked Pili now. "Pili—"

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Pili's anger was incandescent. It transformed her thin face. "It won't ever be that way, will it? You'll never be the ones to starve. You —"

"Pili, we're not divided into people chosen to live and people chosen to die. Juris and the governors are just trying to see that the greatest number of people survive. That's the only way we'll ever see the ships. If they come and we—"

"If they come!" Pili laughed sharply. "Every winter more of us die —*us*, the ones the ships are coming for. And more of *you* live to wait for them." Abruptly she leaned forward, her eyes burning from shadowed hollows. "You say we're not divided into people chosen to live and people chosen to die. But we are. Every Darkmorning when the governors sprinkle the leaf, they choose."

"Pili—"

"We're divided. And we're divided another way too. You didn't know that some of us don't hear the voices when we sleep. Did you? I've never heard the voices. Neither did my sisters. And I know others who don't—others like me." Her voice sank a register. "Other humans."

Tima stared at Pili blankly, struggling to deal with her vehemance, her hatred, now with her starkly irrational declaration. "Pili, we're all human."

"No. I've read the old histories. I read them in their original scripts. And I've looked at the people in the halls—all the people. *Some* of us are human. But every winter, while the mountain powers are talking to you, more of us die. We cry for the ships and we starve. By the time the ships come, there will be no one but Brakrathi left."

Tima drew back, touching suddenly dry lips with her tongue. *Brakrathi.* Why was the term disturbing? "We're all Brakrathi. And we're all human." Yet as she peered into Pili's glittering eyes, doubt threw its shadow between them.

"Of course we are. And the sheep are still sheep," Pili said venomously.

The sheep. Childhood tales came swiftly to Tima's mind. Whenever her father had wanted to place a tale in the long ago, he had begun simply, "Once during the first days, when the sheep were white . . ."

The sheep were not white now. Now the sheep wore dark outer coats that hid them from preying eyes as they grazed on the mountainside.

And some people starved while others slept the winter nourished by a sleek layer of body fat.

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Brakrathi.

Suddenly Pili was on her knees on the rough floor, her hands clenched at her sides. "Everyone knows the sheep have changed. Talk to the master herders and they'll tell you they've seen changes appear and spread through an entire herd within thirty-five years. Ask them if they know what sheep looked like when we first came here, when they were really sheep. If they can't tell you, look in the old histories.

"Then ask Juris Nordin what people were like when they were human."

She pushed impatiently at her hair. "I've seen the pictures. Their ears were like mine. Their noses were like mine. Their hair was like mine. They were like me—not you."

Mutely Tima stared at Pili's exposed ears, at the useless half moon of flesh that decorated the point where the ear joined the head. Unconsciously she touched her own ear. The entire structure was subtly different. So was her nose visibly different from Pili's: longer, narrower, the nostrils puckered into small circular orifices. She frowned, unwillingly cataloguing the differences between them. Her hair was a barely-tamed mass of white; Pili's was dark and thin. Pili's body was long-limbed, willowy, while hers was compact. Pili's chest was shallow, her own deep. Pili's nails were short and brittle; her own could be filed to a cutting edge and used to husk groundnuts, to sever an umbilical cord, even to defend herself against a predator.

And there were so many other differences, small, unremarkable. Tima shifted against the dried reeds, trying to hold back an inexplicable rise of terror. Once, a child, she had asked her father about the differences among the people of the stonehall. He had said, "People are different."

"People are different," she said now. "Some are like you. Some are like me. And some—"

"Some are caught between. We're like a herd that's breeding without a plan. It's taking centuries for those of us who don't fatten well for the winter to breed out. Centuries of starving in our sleep."

"No!" Tima said with a vehemence that caught her by surprise. "No! We're different—that's all. People have always been different from each other. People—"

But Pili cast the savona seeds on the stone floor and clutched Tima's sleeve. All her venom, all her hatred was condensed into a violent whisper. "You know I'm right. You're just afraid to admit that there are humans and there are Brakrathi. You're afraid—because you're waiting for the ships."

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The ships. The ships that would discover them one day, the ships that would return them to worlds where survival was not a constant struggle against cold and starvation. Yes, she was waiting.

"You're waiting for the ships to deliver you—but your body won't wait. It's listened to the winter voices and it's learned that if your hair is thick, you lose less body heat. It's learned that if your nose is long and narrow, the cold air is warm before it reaches your lungs. It's learned that if you put on fat for the winter, you won't starve while you sleep. It's—"

"Then tell me why I have no ear lobes," Tima demanded. "What purpose does that serve?"

Instead of answering, Pili stood, her hands clenched at her sides. "If you're human, tell me why you hear the voices. Or tell me you don't."

Tima stared up at her, mute. At last she said, almost inaudibly, "It's something in the sleepleaf."

Pili shook her head, calm again, composed, as if she had passed through catharsis to decision. "When the ships come, the people who fly them won't hear the voices—because they'll be human. And if you ride the ships away, you'll die. Because the Brakrath powers can't tell you how to live where the days are hot and the winters are short. They can't tell you how to live where the air is dense; where there are no mountain minerals in the water.

"But when the ships come, they'll find me. I know caves where none of the predators will follow me. I'll run—I can run faster than you think. I can reach the caves."

The ice caves. "You'll freeze there."

"Yes, and when the ships come, they'll find one human body on Brakrath, preserved in the ice." Briefly vindictiveness glittered again in her eyes. "It may be the only thing that tells them there were humans here."

Tima peered up at her with the blankness of shock. So many generations had waited. While they waited, had Brakrath molded them to survive upon its rocky slopes—and nowhere else? To survive its storming winters and chill summers—and to perish in the warm climates for which they prayed? If the people who crewed the ships did not find her human, did not find her family human, if they were bound forever to a single icy world . . .

She hardly noticed when Pili left the cabin. Her thoughts were a buzzing chaos. If the people of the halls were no longer human . . .

She hardly recognized her own harsh cry when finally she leaped to her feet and ran to the door. The sky was dark with night and

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cloud. The snow that lay in virgin sheets was despoiled by a single strand of footprints leading up the mountain.

"If Pili runs away to the peaks, you are not to follow," her father had warned her. But she had been human then. Now she was Brakrathi, and she ran up the snowy slope, calling hoarsely.

Pili ran as swiftly as she had boasted. Once Tima glimpsed her as she flew up the treacherous path, her dark hair streaming. Then she disappeared.

Tima had passed Bersh's cabin and Wendell's, had passed Pili's cabin, was stumbling dazed with cold and shock toward the grass line when she heard the mountain's voice. Startled, she fell against a boulder, choking for breath. When the voice came again, it was stronger, a moaning siren call that seemed to originate within her own body. Yet she felt the stony ground shudder and knew the voice came from without, knew it came from the mountain underfoot—from Brakrath itself.

She shook her head, trying to dislodge the possessing voice. It receded briefly, seeming to flow from her and echo away across the mountainside. Then with a twisting convulsion, she felt it surge back into her body. She cried out once, a wailing protest. Then she was running down the icy trail in the grip of the voices of Brakrath.

Once she managed to turn and peer briefly up the mountainside. She saw Pili far above, staring down, a stick figure. If Pili heard the voices too, they did not possess her, did not fling her down the mountain toward safety.

Tima ran in the grip of the shrilling voices, ran past Pili's cabin, past Wendell's and Bersh's. Her legs seemed too numb to carry her, her chest too constricted to supply her breath. But the voices fueled her in her plunging flight. She pushed open the door to the deserted cabin where she and Pili had sheltered and collapsed, boneless, into her vexreed nest.

For moments she stared blindly at the stalks that lit the cabin. Then, almost without her consent, the rhythm of her breathing changed and her eyelids closed over her staring eyes.

She slept when her father arrived the next day with a party of five, slept as they carried her down the mountain on a litter. She did not wake until Juris Nordin leaned over her and spoke a single crisp word.

"Wake."

She woke in Juris's hearing chamber.

"Where is Pili?" Juris Nordin had pulled her heavy white hair into a braided helmet. No strand fell across her strong face. Despite

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the dimness of the room, her grey eyes were luminous with command.

Tima sat, her throat dry, the echo of the voices still in her ears. Her father's face betrayed as little as Juris's. "She ran to the peaks, to the ice caves. I—I followed her. And then the voices drove me back to the cabin." Memory of what Pili had said came back then, twisting her face. "I hadn't taken the leaf but I heard the voices. I heard them and I was awake." Half-accusing, half-desperate, she spilled out Pili's revelation, her own shock and subsequent despair.

Her father glanced at Juris Nordin, demand in his eyes. Juris' mouth tightened. "Pili guessed much and she guessed well. But she failed to guess the final truth."

Suspended between despair and perplexity, Tima stared from Juris's set face to her father's increasingly impatient one. Her father's shoulders set defiantly. "She failed to guess the final truth Juris won't give anyone who doesn't first guess it."

"Nor was any Juris before me inclined to give it," Juris Nordin said sharply. "It's a divisive truth, one not every person can handle without arrogance or vindictiveness. But there are times, there are circumstances . . ." Reluctance clouded her deep-set eyes. "Pili thought the changes Brakrath has made in us render us no longer human. Perhaps she did not read the histories as carefully as she thought; perhaps she simply refused to recognize the truth. The histories our ancestors carried when they were stranded date from long before they left Earth and they make one thing clear. To be human, Tima, is to change. It is in failing to change that a people become less than human."

Tima peered into the deep grey eyes, dimly aware of movement in the hall beyond, of whispered reassurances, ageless, ritual. "I don't understand."

"It is simple, elegantly simple. Over the generations, spontaneous change appears among us. If the bearers of change find the change advantageous, they live and produce offspring, many bearing the same change. If they find it disadvantageous, their bearing years are cut short—or never reached. Eventually—very eventually, when we speak of human populations—an advantageous change can spread into the entire population.

"We have been here many centuries and those of us who utilize foods most efficiently, those of us who stand the cold best, are barely a majority of the population. We've come that far without dying out only because some of our first ancestors already carried those genetic possibilities. We haven't had to wait for a major change to appear

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spontaneously—although many smaller ones have."

Unconsciously Tima's hand went to her face, to her hair.

Juris nodded. "Yes. I'll give you the histories Pili read. When you study them next spring, you'll see that our humanity lies in change, not in stagnation. This has been true from the Earth-times when our species evolved from their arboreal ancestors. It remains so now, inarguably."

Was it Pili then, trapped in a body that had failed to adapt, whose humanity was diminished? "But the ships," Tima pleaded, wanting to accept Juris Nordin's reassurance. "When they come, they won't know us."

"And we won't know them. The humans who fly the stars now will no more have remained static than we have. They will be different—from us, from each other. Just as we will be different."

Tima's eyes darted to her father, trying to read his frowning tension. "And they'll take us away? Even though we're different, they'll take us to the warm worlds?"

Her father spoke softly. "They will surely take those who need to go: Pili's family and all the others whose food requirements are so much higher than ours: all the people whose bodies can't protect them from the cold. And if we want to go, surely they'll take us too. Or they'll show us how to make our own passage when we're ready."

Reluctantly Tima nodded. *This is a harsh world, this is a cruel world,* the litany went. She had seen hardship around her and taken it for her own. Yet she and her family lived without unbearable stress. She had lost no one to starvation or even to predators. She had hardly noticed a degree of cold that had blanched Pili's lips and turned her fingers blue. If it were not for the dreams and the winter voices, strange and troubling . . .

The Brakrath voices. "But we can't leave," she said with returning despair. "I heard the Brakrath voices. They sent me down the mountain. How can we leave them and live?"

"The same way the first star travelers left Earth and lived," Juris Nordin said.

"People have always heard land-voices," Tima's father said. "Sometimes the voices have been so still, so accustomed, people weren't aware of them. Other times the voices cried out so loudly people heard them from across the stars and set out to find them. Brakrath speaks to us now, those of us who are ready to hear, speaks in its unique way. But someday if we hear another voice and if we have ships to carry us, we will go—and we will change again."

They would go and their physical constitutions would alter to

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meet conditions on their new world. Infinitely plastic, their germ plasm would respond to stress by finding new ways to survive. And while the change might require scores of generations, ultimately the human race would recreate itself in a new image.

"Then we have to leave," Tima said at last, softly. "One day we have to go."

Approval softened Juris Norden's features. "You learn quickly. When we have ceased to change here, we must go, just as our ancestors were compelled to leave Earth. Whether on ships that find us or on ships that we create, we must go. Because we must change to remain human."

Tima's father nodded and held out his hand. His clasp was warm. "But for now we must go only as far as our chambers. You've missed the feasting, Tima. The scattering of the leaf has already begun."

Yes, she heard the sleep dispensers chanting in the hall, sweeping whispering people before them. She stood, trembling inwardly at thought of the dreams, of the voices. But if she listened closely enough, the voices would no longer frighten her. They were the voices of the land. They could neither bind her nor destroy her. They could only guide her—and one day release her.

Juris Nordin touched her arm. "Sleep well. When next I see you, we will be that much nearer."

Tima's mouth was dry, her lips stiff. Yet she said the ritual words easily. "That much nearer the time, Juris."

"That much nearer," Tima's father echoed. For a moment, before they stepped into the dark hall, the ships hung between them, bright with promise.

SF . . . SO FAR
THE WORLD'S FIRST ACROSTIC LIMERICK

A creature has eaten the crew
Leaving one crafty astronaut who
In a desperate act
Ejects it intact—
N now we're waiting for *ALIEN II*.

—Mike Buckley & Darcy Giene

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VACATION ON THE MOON
by Martin Gardner

Please, don't write to tell us that
Something Is Wrong With This Story until
you have read it through to the end.

Edgar D. Twitchell, a New Jersey plumber, was on his way to the Moon for a three-week holiday. The rocket ship was too small to generate artificial gravity by spinning, so Twitchell had the strange sensation of feeling his weight steadily diminish as the ship sped toward its destination. When it reached the spot where Earth's stronger gravity field was exactly balanced by the Moon's weaker field, zero *g* prevailed inside the ship. All passengers were kept fastened to their seats, but Twitchell enjoyed the floating feeling nonetheless as he twiddled his thumbs and contentedly puffed a cigar.

Many hours later the ship slowly settled next to one of the huge domes that house the U.S. moon colony, its descent cushioned by rocket brakes. Through the thick glass window by his seat Twitchell caught his first glimpse of the spectacular lunar landscape. Several large seagulls, with tiny oxygen tanks strapped to their backs, were flying near the dome. Above the dome an American flag fluttered in the breeze.

Although it was daylight, the sky was inky black and splattered with twinkling stars. Low on the horizon a rising "New Earth" showed a thin bluish crescent of light with several faint stars shining between the crescent's arms. As Twitchell later learned, the Moon makes one rotation during each revolution around the Earth. Because a rotation takes about 28 days, it takes the Earth about 14 days to rise and set on the Moon.

On the sixth day of his vacation Twitchell was allowed to put on a space suit and hike around the crater in which the dome had been built. After bounding along for a while he came upon a group of children, in pink space suits, playing with boomerangs. One girl tossed a boomerang that made a wide circle and Twitchell had to duck as it whirled past his helmet. Behind him he heard it thud against a large boulder. He turned to look, but the curved stick had fallen into the rock's ebony shadow where it instantly seemed to vanish. Since there is no atmospheric scattering of light on the Moon, objects cannot be seen in shadows without a flashlight.

The Sun was low in the sky when Twitchell began his walk. Now

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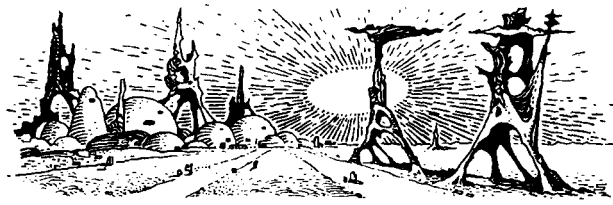
it was sinking out of sight. The "terminator," that sharp line separating the lunar day from night, was gliding across the gray terrain toward the brightly-lit dome at a speed of about 40 miles an hour—much too fast for Twitchell to keep up with it by vigorous hopping.

Twitchell was so exhausted when he returned to his quarters that he fell asleep on his bed, fully clothed, and did not awake until the rising Sun flooded his room with brilliant sunlight.

How many scientific mistakes can you find in the above narrative? They are listed on page 167.



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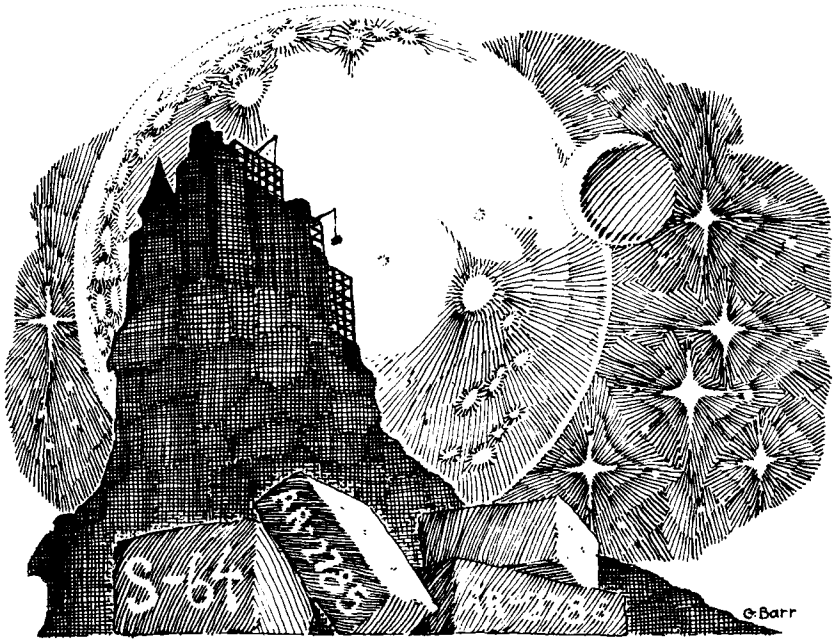

Ms. Mitchell, now 39, has a BS in Chemistry from the University of Rochester and a PhD, same subject, from MIT. She currently works part-time for Eastman Kodak while being a mother to Greg, 9, and Jeff, 5. Her husband, Gary, is a chemist at Kodak. "Heritage" is the author's first adult fiction sale, although she's sold fiction to children's magazines and non-fiction to about a dozen magazines.

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"Are you the woman who has a castle for sale?" he asked when she answered his knock.

Fiona peered at the stranger as she strained to understand his unfamiliar accent. His tall figure was enveloped in a shimmering swirl of cape, but the brown eyes that looked down on her held a kindly expression. Her crisp gray curls bobbed at the back of her neck as she nodded. "Yes, I'm Fiona McDonald. You must be Mr. Merdok. I've been expecting you. Won't you please come in?"

She led the way to the small sitting room of her cottage, where a peat fire smoldered on the hearth. "I was just about to have a cup of tea. Won't you join me?"

"Yes, thank you." Merdok sniffed the smoke and fingered the chintz cover of the armchair curiously. Then his attention was caught by the painting over the fireplace. Despite the cracked and yellowed surface it was a dramatic portrayal of a kilted man standing with drawn sword beside a black horse. "Amazing," he murmured.

"One lump or two?" she asked as she poured tea into an exquisitely thin cup.

"Er . . . one, I suppose. I've never tasted it before." He grinned at her look of astonishment.

"Never had tea? What on earth do you drink?"

"Nothing on Earth. That's just it. That's why I'm here."

"Yes, of course. You are from Hardluck, I understand."

He sipped the tea, grimaced, and quickly put down the cup. "Yes. We're about 100 light-years away from Earth, but that's only a six-month journey now."

"I've heard of Hardluck."

Everyone had heard of Hardluck, the struggling frontier colony which had been transformed into one of the richest planets in the galaxy by the discovery of a fabulous vein of the m'rith gemstones. Now, 50 standard years later, Hardluck's wealth was exceeded by that of only a few of the populated planets—Aurelia, for example, with its forests of precious attona trees, or Ruhalla, with its monopoly on tridenner production.

"You seem interested in my painting, Mr. Merdok."

Merdok jumped as her calm voice interrupted his thoughts. "Why, yes, I am," he said. "Is he one of your ancestors?"

"That is a portrait of Robert McDonald, my many times great-grandfather. He was a famous swordsman and leader in battle. He died in 1745 while fighting alongside our Bonnie Prince Charlie."

Merdok sucked in his breath sharply. "Such a history! To know

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what your ancestors were doing then, to have such a tie with the past . . ." His voice trailed off.

Fiona broke the silence. She rose, smoothing down the skirt of her heavy brown tweed suit. "Would you like to tour the castle now? Do you have better shoes for walking?" She glanced dubiously at his delicately embroidered slippers and then at her own more sensible footwear.

"No matter if these are ruined. I have others," he said as he followed her to the door.

The castle jutted out from the top of the hill that dominated the area. On one side it was poised at the edge of a cliff that dropped steeply to a river that foamed and churned on the rocks below.

"What a magnificent location," Merdok said as they toiled up the path.

"You can see how this site controls the whole valley. My family first built here in the 1570s. From that time on we have been the leaders of this community, responsible for the welfare of all the people in the area." She raised her head in an unconscious gesture of pride.

"And you are . . . forgive me. You are the only one left?"

"My only brother died when he was fourteen. I never married. And you can see it is too late for me to think of having children now."

They had passed through the portcullis gate. Merdok stood at the entrance of the main courtyard and looked around. He touched the moss-encrusted wall reverently. "So old."

She touched his arm to attract his attention. "The round tower across the way is the keep, the place where a beleaguered garrison could make a last stand. There is even a well inside, so that defenders could hold out for a long time against a seige."

"Very impressive." He turned impulsively toward her. "Miss McDonald, I must confess that your castle was not my first choice. I had come to Earth hoping to purchase the Tower of London."

"The Tower of London? Is that for sale?"

"Well, Earth's balance of payments is in such straits . . ." He shrugged apologetically. "At any rate, a delegation from Ruhalla has bid the price of that so prohibitively high that I was forced to look elsewhere. But now that I see your castle I am glad. This looks considerably more intimate than the Tower."

She said dryly, "The Tower of London is not exactly intimate. But come and see the living quarters."

In the main dining hall she waited while he examined the stone-

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work of the massive fireplace in detail. Then she led the way briskly through the kitchens and sleeping quarters.

Merdok stood in a shaft of sunlight let in by one of the tall, slit windows. "And how long has it been since anyone has lived here?"

Fiona spread her hands in appeal. "Lived here? Mr. Merdok, the upkeep on a place like this is frankly more than I can afford. It would need extensive renovations before it would be fit to live in."

"It can be made quite comfortable, I think. Certainly, energy panels must be installed for atmosphere and light control, as well as water; but I will be happy living here, I think."

She was startled, and for one moment shed her calm expression. "You mean to live *here*?"

"Oh, no, not *here*, certainly not. I couldn't live on such an isolated planet. My business affairs require me to be near the major trading centers of the Galaxy. But I would like to live in this castle."

She blinked in evident bewilderment. "I don't understand."

Merdok smiled. "It's very simple. I will buy your castle. I think 5,000 Universal Credits would be a fair price, don't you?" At her weak nod he continued. "My work crew will take the castle apart, carefully number each piece, transport them to Hardluck, and there reassemble it."

"You're going to move the whole castle then?"

"Precisely." He crossed over to her and took her hand reassuringly. "My dear Miss McDonald, I know this must be hard for you. To sell your home, the stone walls that have sheltered your family through the ages, cannot be an easy decision. I can only promise you that this castle will be treasured for the priceless heritage it is. Many of Hardluck's original settlers came from Scotland, as you may know." He hesitated and then looked away almost shyly. "My own grandfather, whom I never knew, may have come from this very area. I assure you that I will care for your castle as if it were my own ancestral home."

"I'm sure you will, after going to all that trouble to move it." She removed her hand gently from his grasp. "Mr. Merdok, it is getting late. We'd best be returning to my cottage."

He fell into step beside her. "There's one thing more. Your portrait of Robert McDonald. I'd like it to hang in its rightful place in the main hall. Would you accept 1,000 Universal Credits for it?"

She gasped. "Mr. Merdok, it's simply not worth that much. It is not a well-known work of art."

"I insist. It is but a small payment for the pain you must suffer parting with things that have been in your family for centuries."

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"You are . . . understanding. Very well, I accept your offer. The money will enable me to help those in our area who are unemployed."

He patted her approvingly on the shoulder. "Tradition dies hard. So you are still keeping up your family responsibilities to the neighborhood. You are an inspiration for me to do likewise on Hardluck."

As he helped her descend the last flight of stairs he paused to look at the stone steps. "Hollows worn by the feet of centuries. What a link with the past! Forgive me, Miss McDonald. I can't help but feel exultant over my acquisition. And, I must tell you in all confidence, tomorrow I fly to Paris to close a deal on one of humanity's great art works. A Rembrandt. It will hang in your castle, another reminder to us on Hardluck of our great cultural heritage as human beings."

She closed her eyes for a moment and then said, "Mr. Merdok, would you please excuse me? I am feeling very tired and would like to be alone."

"Certainly, certainly. I can understand only too well your pain. Our lawyers can conclude our dealings. Farewell, gallant Miss McDonald. Your sacrifice will become part of the folklore of Hardluck."

After he had left, Fiona walked back to her cottage. She propped her elbows on the mantelpiece and stared up at Robert McDonald. "I know what you're thinking," she told his painted face. "You think it isn't the honorable thing to do. Well, when you were the head of the family you did what you thought right. And a proper muddle you left everything in when you died for your ideals, too. I'm doing what I think is necessary for the community now, that's all. And I never tell lies."

A knock on the door made her spin around. She relaxed when she saw the face of an old friend. "Ian! I'm glad you came by. You can spread the news in the village. Tell them there will be jobs for everyone this year. Janet can paint another portrait of Robert McDonald, and we'll be opening up the quarry again."

He beamed at her. "That's good news indeed. And, Miss McDonald, we were wondering if we could build one with a small chapel this time. It would make for a little variety."

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HARK, HARK, THE QUARK!

Hark, hark, the quark!
The quintessential quark.
So quick it leaves no trace,
  no picosecond spark to mark its place
    in subatomic space.

Hark, hark, the quark!
The quick-reacting quark.
Ere gigavolts can shake
  the nanocosmic quark apart, 'twill make
    charmonium and never break.

Like neapolitan, it has three flavors.
What? No spumoni?
O, let us talk of physicists and rings,
Of pions, muons, bosons, gluons,
Of tokamaks and other things,
And such bologna
That the theorists dearly love and savor.

Hark, hark, the quark!
The quasi-real quark.
With charm to soothe atomic breast,
  in existential dark its spark our quest,
    we find no way, no final test.

—Grant Carrington

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Mr. MacIntyre was born in Scotland and raised in the Australian outback. He presently lives in New York City, writing free-lance.

There are two edges to reality, son of my son, each as different from the other as night is from day. There is the Wakingworld, and then there is the Dreamtime. In the Dreamtime all times and all places are one, my child, and every corner of the universe touches every other. And remember, my child, that when the Dreamtime commands, then you must obey. For it is in the Dreamtime that we will dance among the stars. . . .

When Kundekundeka was five, his grandfather Ramijirring told him legends of the Dreamtime and beyond. On a summer night, while the tribe gathered in the ritual of *corroborree,* while the moon glistened mystically over the waters of the distant billabong, and while the silver airships of the Men-with-White-Skins drifted overhead, Ramijirring spoke.

He told of Kunapipi, the feathered she-serpent of the far-distant Dreamtime, who created men from the grass and women from the sand and bade them multiply across the desert outback. He told of Jangardbla, the red-haired warrior who slew a hundred enemies with his strong left hand, and who conquered the beast-men of Looritcha, and he told of the people *Wandjina,* who came from the stars and went back to them, in the days of our grandfathers' grandfathers, and who wore lightning in their hair. All this was many rains ago, in the Big Walktime when the coolibah groves breathed magic, and the Bunyip sang, and the enchanted *Miruru* spirits rode the high wind. But then the Men-with-White-Skins came, and brought their guns and horses and fences, and said this place Woombalooru was now part of some land called Australia, and on that day the magic left Woombalooru forever.

When Kundekundeka was nine, his grandfather Ramijirring taught him how to play the wooden drum and the tree-flute, and then when Kundekundeka had mastered these his grandfather taught him to play the most beautiful instrument of all: the didjeridoo. Ten feet long and as thick as a man's arm it was, but Kundekundeka never forgot how it sang silver notes when his grandfather breathed life into it:

OOdaOOdaOOdadadaOOROOdadaOOROOdaah . . !

When Kundekundeka was twelve, the time came to prepare for

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his entry into manhood. His grandfather Ramijirring taught him how to use the woomera and the spear and the knife. He taught him how to stalk game, how to bring down the giant red *gang'garu* with one throw of the curved-stick boonang, and how to make the boonang fly back to his hand if he missed. And he taught him how to use the bull-roarer, the flat stick on a thong that could sing to the spirits and let them know that the hunting was good.

"Always remember, son of my son," Ramijirring would say, "that you are a member of the tribe Woombalooru, the most noble of nations. And we the tribe Woombalooru are the favoured ones, for we are watched over by the spirits who dwell in mighty Oolooru, the Stone-from-the-Sky. Sacred is Oolooru above all else."

Oftentimes, on a steaming summer night while the men of the tribe did their snake-dance to the throb of the didjeridoo, young Kundekundeka could see Oolooru towering on the desert horizon. He asked his aged grandfather why the Woombalooru spent their days wandering, instead of living peacefully in the shade of Oolooru.

"Many rains ago," the old man whispered in the light of the flickering fire, "mighty Oolooru fell out of the heavens, fell between the stars and landed in this place. Oolooru Stone-from-Sky is the sacred place of our tribe Woombalooru.

"Nowadays no man among us goes there, but in my day Oolooru was home. Shall I tell you what the place was like, child? Rock and sand and little else, but if you can climb the rocky peaks of Oolooru as I did once, aye, and reach the very centre of the crest you shall find the Valley of Oolooru. And there grow trees and birds and grasses, and the waters are sweet. In the Valley of Oolooru, son of my son, far away from mortal eyes."

Kundekundeka was silent, and for a moment he sat and listened to the throb of the didjeridoo:

OOdaOOdaOOdadadaOOROOdadaOOROOdaah . . . !

"But why have we wandered from Oolooru, grandfather? Why may we never see the Valley of Oolooru?"

"Because the Men-with-White-Skins came with their jeeps and their trucks," said Ramijirring, "with their dollars and their sunglasses and their Coca-Cola stands and their Polaroid cameras and they chased us away from our homeland Oolooru." The old man's eyes moistened as he spoke. "They call the place Ayers Rock now, I think."

Kundekundeka was silent, and in the stillness of night the didjeridoo played more loudly.

When Kundekundeka was fourteen he became a man. Two Woom-

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balooru tribesmen held him down while the tribe Doctor Man performed the circumcision with a Wilkinson Sword razor blade. Kundekundeka was determined not to cry out during the ordeal, lest he shame the spirits of mighty Oolooru. But the pain was too great and he screamed. Afterwards, he crept alone to a place where none could see him behold Oolooru on the twilight horizon. "I have been unworthy, Oolooru," he whispered to the towering monolith, "but I shall make it up to you, in the time of walkabout."

And the huge sandstone form heard him, and turned from orange to purple and back again, to show that it understood.

The day of walkabout arrived, and Kundekundeka and each of the other young males stood proud and erect as the elders addressed them. Each youth stood, some naked and some with loincloth and one in Levi dungarees, and took the weapon of his choosing. Kundekundeka chose the knife, and took a bull-roarer as well so the spirits would know if his hunting was good.

He struck out towards the south with two other lads. After three miles he left them and began travelling east, towards Oolooru Stone-from-the-Sky.

In the distance he suddenly heard a didjeridoo playing, mocking him with its notes, and he froze: was this a good omen or bad? He squinted into the eastern sky towards Oolooru, and at that instant the angry red monolith turned a friendly shade of yellow as the sun climbed over its peak.

A good omen. Kundekundeka gripped the knife in his teeth and broke into a run towards the peak. Towards the Valley of Oolooru, where the waters were sweet. And if the Valley was there, then he, Kundekundeka, was going to find it.

"Ayers Rock," said the tour guide, "one single massive sandstone, the largest rock to be found anywhere on Earth. Over a thousand feet high, friends, and five miles round at the base. Why, it covers more ground than the city of London!"

A fat lady held up her hand. "But aren't there aborigines living here? I thought they were living on the peak of the rock."

"Not quite, mum," said the tour guide as flashcubes popped. "Years ago the abos lived here, yes, but they've gone. When we get a bit farther on you'll see paintings on the rock, aboriginal paintings where they mix the paint with blood. Some sort of mumbo-jumbo ritual, I'll be bound. Every so often some abo would try to freshen up the paintings with a bit of his own blood supply, and we had to chase them away."

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A skinny man with absolutely no hair spoke up. "Why is this place so sacred to the aborigines, anyway?"

"The abos believe the rock fell out of the sky many years ago and landed here. All I can say is I'm glad I wasn't standing there when it happened."

In the shadows of the trees Kundekundeka watched. It was late afternoon by now; he wanted to reach the Valley of Oolooru before moonrise. Kundekundeka edged warily towards the superhighway that ran between him and Oolooru; he had never seen asphalt before and was sure it would feel horribly alien.

His foot touched the road, and at that instant he heard the distant drone of a didjeridoo: *OOdaOOda*. Kundekundeka jumped back as if he'd been stabbed. Overhead, mighty Oolooru suddenly turned bright magenta.

It was too late to turn back. There were no white men in sight now. Kundekundeka took a deep breath, stuck his knife between powerful jaws and raced across the roadway towards the sandstone monolith. A mighty leap, black fingers scrabbling for a grip, and then he was up. He, Kundekundeka, son of the Woombalooru, had returned to the home of his people!

OOdaOOdaOOdadadaOOROOdadaOOROOdaah . . . !

He climbed. Even in the afternoon that was turning to evening it was blistering hot, and the sweat rolled off Kundekundeka in rivulets. At last he came to a flat place three hundred feet up, and rested for a time. He was still gasping for breath when he heard footsteps behind him.

The old man was white, but the sun had made him nearly as bronze as Kundekundeka. The wary youth was too exhausted to stand as the white man came over.

"You speak English, fella?"

Kundekundeka remained silent.

"Not to worry, mate; I'm dinkum. My name's Lofty. You get lost or something?"

Kundekundeka sat up with an effort. His knife was lying on the ground beside his hand and he wondered how to pick it up without provoking an attack. These white men had guns . . .

Lofty took a step towards him, saw the youth tense, and stayed where he was. "Look, cobber, I live on this rock. Government pays me, y'know. If you're lost I can help you get home but if you're huntin' budgeree you'll have to do it someplace else. So what's it to be?"

Off in the distance a whine, a thrum of gathering power. Kun-

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dekundeka looked and saw some strange sort of flying machine coming towards him, parallel to the wall of Oolooru. He reached for the knife and gripped it hard.

"That's just the whirlybird, mate. You want a ride back down? Be somethin' to tell your brothers and sisters about, over the . . ."

Kundekundeka broke into a run, slipping past the man Lofty and on up the slope towards the crest. A bit of scrub here, some shrubbery there springing up from the sandstone; he used whatever cover he could find on his rush to reach the Valley of Oolooru. Helter-skelter he ran, with the sweat pouring out of his flesh and the blood vessels pounding in his eardrums . . .

OOdaOOdaOOdadadaOOROOdadaOOROOdaah . . . !

A shadow dropped out of the sky, hovering over him like some winged carrion-eater, and Kundekundeka looked up and saw the flying machine. He screeched in dismay and ran faster, ducked beneath an overhang where the flying machine could not follow, and raced upwards toward the crest of Oolooru while the didjeridoo went mad inside his brain . . .

OOdaOOdaOOROOdada . . . !

Another hundred feet, another hundred feet. He risked a glance backwards and saw the white man Lofty puffing along right behind him. "Hi! Stop there, you! We won't hurt you, sonny, but you've got to get off this bloomin' rock!"

"Oolooru!" gasped Kundekundeka as he ran. A face flashed past him, red and blue it was with much yellow, and even as he ran Kundekundeka recognised it: the face of the *Wandjina,* the sky-beings, painted on the edge of the rock one night centuries past. He was getting close to the Valley of Oolooru!

OOdaOOdaOOROOdada . . . !

The flying machine rushed down upon him. Kundekundeka turned and dodged, and then in the last fading glow of desert twilight he scrambled to the top of the crest and looked down to see what lay beyond.

The Valley of Oolooru!

The flying machine was right over him now, and the boy scrambled away, slipping into the undergrowth and towards the lush green valley that beckoned beneath him. Another few steps, another few steps, *OOdaOOda,* and then on the very edge of the mystic valley white fingers gripped him and white hands pinioned his arms, and then they were dragging him up the hillside towards the flying machine.

"Oolooru!" sobbed Kundekundeka, but the valley was gone.

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"Crazy abos," grunted Lofty. "Always tryin' to do their mumbo-jumbo on the bleedin' rock. Hi, Charlie, this darkie's a right wild 'un."

The last thing Kundekundeka saw as they dragged him away was the sky full of stars, and suddenly for no reason at all he remembered his grandfather's tales of the *Wandjina,* who came from the stars and went back to them, in the days beyond the Dreamtime. For a long moment he wondered which of those tiny lights in the sky was the *Wandjina* homeland, and then suddenly nothing mattered anymore.

OOdaOOdaOOdadadaOOROOdadaOOROOdaah . . . !

"You want to *what?*" screeched Arnstein. After ten years in the Service he'd have sworn that nothing could surprise him anymore, but right now he was getting the surprise of his career.

"I want to stay behind," repeated the brown-skinned crewman. "Here on Mars, with just a spear and a knife. The ship can get back to Earth without me, and there'll be another ship coming for me in three months' time."

"You're crazy," said the commander. "I'd have booted you out of the Service long since if you weren't the best astrogator I've ever seen. What's this walkabout nonsense, anyway?"

Johnny Kundekundeka Longfellow, which was the name they'd saddled him with when he'd joined the Service, drew himself up to full height. "The walkabout is one of the sacred rituals of Woombalooru. It is one man's attempt to triumph over a hostile environment. When a boy becomes a man he sets out alone in the desert. If he comes back alive he has proven worthy of manhood. If not, well . . ."

Arnstein grunted. "And you figured you'd wait until you got to Mars to walkabout, hey?"

"No, sir; I did my walkabout on Earth, but I failed and was brought home by the white men in disgrace. I could not face my Woombalooru brothers and went to live among the white men."

Arnstein switched on the ventilator so he could light his pipe. Outside the porthole he could see a team of surveyors returning to the ship, faces masked by breathing apparatus, bodies glowing an eerie red in the light of the far-off volcano Nix Olympica on the Martian horizon. "I still don't see why you're so eager to commit suicide," he said.

"Sir, are you familiar with the ways of Woombalooru? Our most sacred possession is the Dreamtime, the other side of reality that

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we journey to in sleep. We hold our dreams and our nightmares to be of vital importance."

Commander Arnstein sucked hard on his pipe. "So?"

"Most dreams, commander, are omens of a sort: warnings or predictions of some major event. So says Woombalooru lore. But last night, sir, last night breathing Martian air through Terran converters, I had a dream that took the form of a *command*." Arnstein was silent and Kundekundeka continued. "The dream commanded me to do walkabout again, to succeed where before I had failed. I *must* do walkabout on Mars."

"Do people in your tribe who flunk walkabout first time generally get a second chance?" Arnstein wanted to know.

"Never, sir. It has never been done. But neither has a son of Woombalooru trod the Martian sands before. Last night the Dreamtime told me that I must not fail my second walkabout because there will be no hope of rescue; after this ship leaves without me tomorrow I'll be alone on this planet until the next expedition lands in three months."

"Let me get this straight," said the commander. The surveying team was aboard by now; he'd better end this discussion fast if he didn't want to miss chow. "You want me to dump you butt-naked on Mars with no supplies and no chance of rescue? And you're doing this because a *dream* told you to?"

Kundekundeka nodded. "It sounds foolish to you, I know. But when the Dreamtime commands, the Woombalooru obey. I do not believe I would receive a dream of this nature unless there were some vital purpose behind it. That is my religion. I could point out characteristics of your own religion that seem just as foolish to . . ."

"Damn it, religion is one thing, but you're talking about *suicide!* Request denied, Longfellow. Dismissed!"

Johnny Kundekundeka Longfellow went to the hatchway and turned. "When the Dreamtime commands, then the Woombalooru obey. This ship leaves tomorrow morning, commander. I will not be on board."

"You'll be on board and at your post if I have to *nail* you to it!" growled Arnstein. "You're the only astrogations man aboard I can trust to get this crate back to Earth, and I'll be damned if I leave you here on Mars and have your death on *my* Service record. Request denied, denied, and denied once again! Dis-*missed!*"

These crazy foreigners, Arnstein thought as he made his way down to mess. Oh well, maybe there'll be pie for dessert . . .

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Kindekundeka made one last check of the breathing apparatus and then fitted the respirator over his mouth and nose. He'd gone through quite a moral struggle and finally decided the oxygen device would not violate the basic strictures of walkabout. In the walkabout on Earth such a device would have been forbidden, of course, but on Earth it would have been unnecessary.

He shrugged himself into the jumpsuit and zipped it up: one more item that was vital to survival in the Martian climate. But from here on it was strictly back-to-nature: no radio, no medical supplies, and he'd have to hunt for his water and food. Provided there *was* life on Mars that qualified as food, of course; so far the expedition hadn't found any. But surely the spirits of the Dreamtime would provide.

He ripped loose the emergency survival kit that was sewn into the jumpsuit's lining and flung it aside, then picked up the survival kit of the Woombalooru: a spear and a knife. He hefted the curved-stick boonang (which the white men insisted on calling a *boomerang*), and wondered if it would return to his hand as it did on Earth. He took it along.

In the silence of his cabin the commander's words came back to him, and for a moment Kundekundeka thought that perhaps Arnstein was right: he *was* committing suicide. But no, that was ridiculous; had not the Dreamtime counseled him wisely all his life? Why should it betray him now?

Silently, as befit a Woombalooru stalker, he slipped along down the passageway to the airlock. MacDonald was on duty and Kundekundeka strode up jovially and waved to the older man.

"Got a little treat here, Mack." Johnny Kundekundeka Longfellow grinned broadly and held up two frosty cans of Foster's Lager that he'd bartered out of the mess officer. "Here, have a drink." He pressed one can into his friend's hand, then held up the other can and winked. "Me, I think I'll enjoy this outside. Sip a little beer and admire the view, eh?"

"Fine by me, Johnny." MacDonald activated the airlock mechano and then stopped. "Hey, what's with the spear, friend?"

"Eh? Oh, just thought I'd get in a little target practice before lights-out." The brown man grinned. "Who knows? Maybe I'll spear a Martian before he can zap me with his death-ray. Say, Mack, sing out my name at roll call tomorrow, will you? I'd like to get a little extra sack time."

"Sure thing, Johnny. Just be back before we shove off tomorrow morning." MacDonald opened the can of beer he'd been given and

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raised it to his lips. "Hey, wouldn't it be funny if you missed the boat and had to wait three whole months for the next one?"

The Martian wind bit hard into his face and Kundekundeka hunched over and turned up the respirator. It suddenly occurred to him that he ought to go back and get a spare power pack just in case the apparatus didn't have enough juice for the whole three months . . . No, on second thought he'd have to take that chance; he was supposed to survive the walkabout on Woombalooru wits, not white men's hardware.

Besides, wasn't it preordained that he *had* to survive? The Dreamtime would never have told him to do walkabout in this unearthly place without some definite reason. And when the Dreamtime speaks to a son of Woombalooru, he *must* obey.

In the low Martian gravity a hundred yards was like nothing, and with long loping strides Kundekundeka had soon left the ship far behind. The next expedition from Earth would be landing a few hundred miles to the north, in Mare Boreum. The stars looked strange in a Martian sky, and of course the Southern Cross that he'd always used as a pathfinding aid on Earth would be useless here even if he could find it (which he couldn't). But the ancient aboriginal instincts were strong in his Woombalooru soul, and in no time Kundekundeka had plotted out a course to the north. Already the ship from Earth was out of sight in the distance behind him . . .

OOdaOOdaOOROOdada . . .

Kundekundeka stopped dead in his tracks and felt the flesh crawl at the back of his neck. The sound of the didjeridoo was unmistakeable . . . and it was coming from the east.

OOdadadaOOROOdaah . . . !

As if in a trance he took a step towards the sound, then recovered his senses and turned to the north, then back again to the south. What was wrong? What was he doing out here anyway? The ship! Get back to the ship before they leave without you! This was crazy, sneaking out here like this *OOdaOOda* go north! No, south, damn it! Noise in my *OOda* east, in the *OOdaOOda* look at *OOROOdadaOOROOdada . . .*

The sound was undeniable, cutting into his brain like a knife, throbbing until he thought his eardrums would split *OOdaOOda*. Kundekundeka turned and ran, pounded hard through the red dust of Mars until he suddenly stopped and cried out:

"Oolooru!"

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It was there, rising straight up from the flat Martian desert towards the sky: the single red towering monolith that he knew, that he'd known, that his grandfather Ramijirring had whispered tales of in the flickering firelight of evening . . .

"Oolooru!"

It was the same, it was the exact same hulking silhouette: every crevice and peak was the same, the same shape that he'd known back on Earth. Exactly the same in every possible way except that it was a hundred million miles from where it ought to be . . .

How?

OOdaOOdaOOROOdada . . .

It was too late to go back. It was too late to do anything except heed the summons of the Dreamtime. He felt a suffocating sensation, tore the white man's clothing from his body and let his brown skin breathe free. He gripped his spear in one hand and his knife in the other and stood tall and erect. He, Kundekundeka, son of the tribe Woombalooru, had returned to Oolooru at last!

OOdaOOdaOOROOdada . . .

He tore the respirator from his face and breathed pure desert air, filled his lungs with its tang. Then he flung aside his spear, stuck his knife between powerful jaws and raced towards the sandstone monolith. A mighty leap, black fingers scrabbling for a grip, and then he was up.

OOdaOOdaOOdadadaOOROOdadaOOROOdaah . . . !

He climbed. In the gravity of Mars he practically flew up the hard rock face, bare feet and fingers soaring effortlessly up the sandstone wall, until at last he came to a flat place nine hundred feet up, and rested although he needed no rest. The call of the didjeridoo was louder now, in the back of his brain *OOdaOOda . . .*

Off in the distance a whine, a thrum of gathering power. Kundekundeka looked and saw some strange sort of flying machine coming towards him, some manner of . . . No! The rocket sled from the ship! They'd found out he was missing and now they were coming after him! He reached for the knife and gripped it hard.

OOdaOOdaOOROOdada . . .

The sound jarred him back to his senses. What the hell was he doing here? What was he doing on some Martian mountain, freezing his butt without a jumpsuit, trying to breathe this crazy pink Martian air with no respirator? He should have dropped dead by now!

OOdadadaOOROOdaah . . . !

And if that was a didjeridoo he heard, coming down from the peak of this rock that looked just like Oolooru, if that was a didjeridoo,

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then who was *Playing* it?

OOda! OOda! OOdadada!

Kundekundeka broke into a run, scrambling on up the slope towards the crest. A bit of scrub here, some shrub . . . *shrubs on Mars? No such thing!* on his rush to reach the Valley of Oolooru that he instinctively knew was there, that *had* to be there. Helter-skelter he ran, with the sweat pouring out of his flesh and the blood vessels pounding in his eardrums . . .

OOdaOOdaOOdadadaOOROOdadaOOROOdaah . . . !

A shadow dropped out of the Martian sky, hanging over him like some carrion-eating rocket sled, and Kundekundeka looked up and saw the helicopter no that's back on Earth I mean flying machine. He screeched in dismay and ran faster up the sloping rock face towards the crest of Oolooru while the didjeridoo went mad inside his brain . . .

OOdaOOdaOOROOdada . . .

OOdaOOdaOOROOdada . . .

"Oolooru!" gasped Kundekundeka as he ran. The flying machine rushed down upon him, its streamlined hull gleaming in the crimson aurora of its jets. He turned and dodged. and in the first dawning glow of Martian sunrise he scrambled to the top of the crest, eleven hundred feet above the surface of the planet, and looked down to see what lay beyond.

OOROOdadaOOROOdada . . .

The ground collapsed beneath him, and Kundekundeka fell, hurtling down in a shower of sandstone. Something hard struck his skull and he lay moaning, trying to fathom where he could possibly be.

Child of the Woombalooru, child of the coolibah desert . . .

A cavern . . . light, strange light coming from everywhere at once and from no place in particular. A *fading* light, a light about to die. Kundekundeka sniffed; the air was like Earth air but mustier, and the cavern was warm. The gravity was wrong too; if anything, a little heavier than on Earth. . . .

Child of the Woombalooru, hear me. . . .

Words in his head. Through haggard eyes, Kundekundeka found the source of the light: an altar, an elevation in the centre of the chamber. A withered figure lying calmly on the hard stone surface, wizened fingers outstretched and sightless eyes gazing longingly towards the stars. . . .

Kundekundeka, son of the tribe Woombalooru, hear my words . . .

Dazed, confused, the brown man staggered towards the figure on

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the slab. Body like a man, yet not a man; feet and fingers incredibly old with the life fading out of them. Face like a . . . Kundekundeka knew that face. He'd looked upon it a hundred times in the cavern paintings of his homeland, glimpsed it fleetingly on the rock walls of mighty Oolooru Stone-from-the-Sky. His grandfather Ramijirring had whispered the ancient tales to him, of how the *Wandjina* came from the stars and went back to them, in the days beyond the Dreamtime. And now somehow Kundekundeka knew, knew without asking, that this was the very last of the ancient *Wandjina* that lay silent before him.

Hear my words, Kundekundeka, for my time here is short. . .

Wordless, the brown man huddled in the half-light at the foot of the slab.

We were many once and mighty, my people Wandjina. On a thousand thousand worlds we made our homes, observing life, watching a thousand races flourish. . . . And one such race was your own, my child: the Woombalooru.

"Was it you who summoned me to this place?" Kundekundeka whispered.

Yes. I detected Woombalooru life-strength when first you came to this world. The means by which I planted the dream in your mind, by which I enabled you to survive without oxygen on the high Martian plain, by which I control the climate in this chamber and made this very mountain itself assume the likeness of blessed Oolooru in your eyes . . . these are all quite simple things for a race as old as mine, although they required an exertion of so much of my fast-dwindling life-strength that I fear I can remain but little longer . . .

"You brought me here . . . Why?"

For selfish reasons, I fear: I am dying and would look upon Earth-child life once again. The words in Kundekundeka's head were growing fainter every moment. And now the time approaches when I must depart . . .

"But wait!" pleaded Kundekundeka. "You have touched the stars, your mind must contain great wisdom and knowledge. My people, the people of Earth, are still taking our first steps into space. And we have famines and disease and war and hate and madness. Can't you please, please, tell me how my race can stop these . . ."

Fool! cried the withered voice in his mind, fairly weeping with rage. Man, man, foolish little mortal man. Do you think me a god, who can solve your race's troubles with a single cosmic Answer?

Kundekundeka shivered in coldness and fear. "But there must be an Answer, a way to end forever death and poverty and ignorance

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and . . ."

Man, man, Earth-child, shall I tell you why my people Wandjina have travelled to a thousand thousand worlds? We were searching for that very same Answer! For a million aeons it has eluded us. Perhaps if, instead of looking outward, to the hevavens, we had looked inward, sought the Answer within ourselves . . .

Kundekundeka was silent.

But this much have I learned, said the whisper, and when the words came Kundekundeka heard them not in his head but in every fibre of his being:

You must never fail to heed the summons of the Dreamtime, for of all the creatures of Earth, only the man-child and woman-child can truly dream. And it is only the dreamers who can reach out to touch the stars . . .

Harsh wind, a blast of cold Martian air on his face. Kundekundeka started in fear and found himself naked, with the air getting colder and more alien every moment.

"Johnny! You in there? Where in . . . Jesus! Get that blanket in here, will you?" In the thickening haze Johnny Kundekundeka Longfellow made out the features of MacDonald, squinting out from behind a respirator. A blanket was thrown over Kundekundeka from somewhere, and without a moment's hesitation MacDonald tore the respirator from his own face and pressed it over the other man's mouth and nose.

Commander Arnstein appeared, mad as hell. "Longfellow, you idiot, I'm going to see you court-martialed for this if it takes from now till . . ."

"With all due respect, commander, shut your trap," growled MacDonald. "Don't you see where we are? A stone chamber, carved out of the rock. Some kind of altar over there. It's an *archaeological find,* man; life on Mars, and Johnny here found it! He'll be a hero once we get back to Earth, and . . ."

Kundekundeka heard no more. Through half-closed eyes he saw a bit of dust on the cold stone slab, a bit of dust that had once been something very like a man and now was whirling away in the shrill Martian wind. And completely exhausted now, Kundekundeka left the World of Waking and journeyed across the edge of reality to the Dreamtime. For it was in the Dreamtime that he would dance among the stars. . . .

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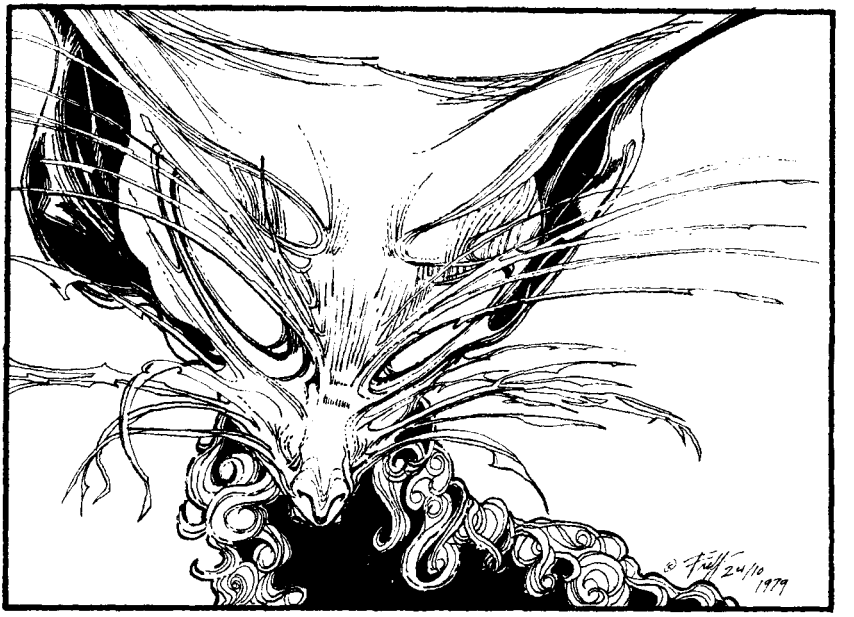
STORYTELLER
by Ardis Waters
art: Freff



The author tells us she was born in Iowa. Migrated to California nearly 20 years ago. Checkered past. Lives in a redwood forest with four kids (some of whom she gave birth to), too many cats, some rats, and a chicken named Ernie. "Storyteller" is her first sale. It was written in a laundromat. She is currently collaborating with her sister, Melisa Michaels (who also made her first prose sale to this magazine), on a novelet.

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Sherry was a storyteller. Sherry wasn't an author or writer; she didn't in*vent* stories, she *told* stories. How she did tell stories! Sherry could tell a story to widen kiddies' eyes, keep adults enthralled. She told stories old (mostly) and new (sometimes). Stories long and short; stories from the hill country of the U S of A, Old Earth; from the deeps of space; from the Hidden Folk of Sweetspring Island on Balthor; from old Darkover and newer Trantor. A story about Ringworld and one of Beings who live in hearts of stars; about brave heroes, good children, and noble pets. She knew the myth and folklore that people need to find a place among each other and within the intricate universe.

We knew that Sherry had a talent. We knew she was a master of the storytelling craft. For sure. We knew it was a pleasure to listen: ever hear a *good* storyteller? Sherry could start some tale we'd heard a million times—*Stone Soup*, for example—and we'd wonder why she bothered until suddenly we'd be *caught up*. Is there a way to describe it? I'll try: she'd start with a description of three soldiers travelling home after war. We'd listen and watch, to be polite.

Sherry's pretty—did I mention that? Small, with soft, goldie-brown hair and lovely eyes that sparkle. When you watch her face and those eyes, somehow it gets hard to quit watching. Especially when Sherry's telling a story. So you watch and listen and—next thing you know, you're *in*terested in what three ordinary soldiers did.

Then she grows animated; her eyes light up (even more). She begins to move around and, willy-nilly, everyone's eyes follow Sherry. Somehow, old as the story may be, everyone listens eagerly.

When everyone is caught—so they *can't* not listen—her hands reel them in, gestures evoke a whole 'nother world that no one could possibly ignore.

Pretty Sherry, looking at this person, then that person, asks, "Do you know what they did then?" and who*ever* she asks will answer, innocent as a child (though he or she has heard this one forever and surely knows what comes next), "No . . . what?" Looking bemused, curious, and intrigued. Entranced.

Sherry was a storyteller. She wasn't an author, writer, celebrity. She didn't care for that. Sherry told stories and made them real. We loved her and considered storytelling a charming talent but thought it . . . well, *use*less. Sure, we enjoyed it. But no one took it seriously until:

We were in a centipede-buggy on Saxony, cruising home with a

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newly acquired fortune. Fortunes aren't hard to find, if you're willing to risk your life. We decided to, and from thousands of planets and moons with saleable resources, we picked Saxony and psi-stones. Saxony isn't *very* dangerous, after all (comparatively).

We were four: Sherry, Laura, Paul and I. We're old friends and work well together. We trust each other and know each other's freaks and foibles. Makes it more comfortable to face danger together.

Success! We were really rich! Now Sherry could have the baby she'd been wanting. (I was coming round to the idea that I might not mind being involved in that project.) Laura could light-sculpt her way to fame; Paul would buy himself a plantation.

We thought we had it made. We were on top of the world. It was over; we were on the way *back*. Nothing could stop us now.

Wrong.

Have you been on Saxony? Thought not. Who would? It's not as though it were pretty or had a decent climate, culture, or good vi*bra*tions, even. Saxony has one, count it, one thing: psi-stones.

So if you haven't visited Saxony, and I'll assume you haven't, you may have forgotten Saxony's major disadvantage: psychovores. Nobody knows why they do it, or how; but psychovores "eat" your . . . well, your soul. (Whatever *that* is.) They're psychic vampires; they feed and then you're not a psychic something any more. At all. None. Kaput. Phooie. All gone. *No* psyche (". . . I roam through an alley of Cypress, of Cypress with Psyche, my soul . . ." Edgar Allen *Poe* said that) left. I saw one victim of psychovores: like a giant baby only without the loveable. What's a baby without the loveable? Yeah. Fate worse than death and all that, huh?

Psychovores aren't usually a problem, though, because as long as you stay awake, they can't "eat" you. And there's a cheap, easy-to-use psychic shield (don't ask me how it works) to use at night. No trouble.

Right?

Wrong again.

When the landslide hit our centibug, it smashed not only the drive gears (unnecessarily exposed to the elements, *I* thought) but, worse yet, the Burton Mfg. Co. Psycho-Guard. (Similarly and unnecessarily exposed. No one from Burton was there to discuss these design errors with, however. No one was there but us. Frightened. Alone.)

"I ask myself," I said, "Self, why? Why, oh why *ever* was the psycho-guard mounted on the exterior of the centibug?"

Self did not reply.

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No one did.

There we were in the middle of a desert with no psycho-guard and no centibug. Nothing but weird plants, rocks, and psychovores. Terrific.

"Again I ask myself," I said (again), "Self? Why, oh why, oh *why* was the psycho-guard not better protected?"

No answers.

It was like that. We stood, silent, trying not to come to terms with the probability that we were dead. I did not want to turn to Sherry, declare undying love, and offer to have dozens of children with her if ever we made it out of this alive. (Or did I?)

No one said anything. Everyone said nothing.

Desert. Death. Or, worse yet, not death. I tried to console myself with the fact that if we all became aged, unloveable babies, at least *we'd* never know . . . it wasn't much consolation.

Don't think we'd been negligent. Landslides aren't common there. The cliff/hill looked as if it had been there forever and intended to stay the same for another ever. The soil is not loose, nor are there frequent earthquakes. If a section of that desert landscape looks like a cliff, hill, or mound, you can count on it to remain so.

But this one didn't. Like a herd of buffalo, sowbirds, elephants, grossheep (choose one) it came down. Death was in my ears, I couldn't see, I breathed dirt and rocks. I guess I grabbed Sherry. Protectively, I hope.

Then it was over and we were all right.

Well, sort of. Laura had a bump on her shoulder, Paul a scrape on his forehead, and the centibug was missing two legs. And we were stranded many kilometers from the nearest human habitation without a psycho-guard. That's not all right—it's prolonged death, probably.

No one wanted to admit that, so we examined the centibug. Not good. Not only were two legs broken, which it *could* limp along without, but the drive gears (*crim*inally exposed) were also damaged.

Sherry said, "We'll have to walk."

Paul said, "Yeah."

Maps. Compasses. Computations. There was a chance. (If we were right about our distance from Crescent City.) Walking at night would be difficult, if not impossible; the lamps, clipped on the side of the centibug (mightn't you know) were destroyed. We couldn't risk sprained or broken ankles. Better to stop during the nights. We thought we could make it in two days—maybe.

We set out. Packing was easy—flexibags of water, dried rations,

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light-as-air monomolecular ponchos, etc.—and we even took the psi-stones, figuring to be rich if we lived. We had equipment to go anywhere for days, *weeks* even. If only it were safe to sleep. Which it wasn't.

In a couple of hours they were all around—psychovores. We tried to drive them away. Yelled, threw rocks, jumped about and waved our arms, but to no avail. They *would* duck thrown rocks. Otherwise they ignored our efforts and crowded closer, trying to rub against our legs like affectionate cats, trilling high-pitched little noises. Knee high, brown and grey tweed fur, yellow luminous eyes, pointed ears, sharp snouts, and fluffy tails; they were *cute* little fellows. If you didn't know what they were, could do, *would* do, given the slightest chance.

No one knew much about them—why they "eat" souls or if it's intentional, what they do with the rest of their time, etc. No one had bothered. Most of Saxony is desert, barren and unappealing. There are thousands of habitable planets; many are paradises. Why bother with deserts or their dangerous inhabitants? No one, least of all Sherry, Paul, Laura, and I knew what made psychovores tick. Or go away. Or even, should we get them to go away, how far was far enough.

We walked on. Sherry said, "They're kind of cute." Laura said, "Yeah." I looked at Paul. He shrugged.

It was hot and dry, which hurt the nose and throat. The sun, Arturos by name, was whitish and blinding. It made the eyes water. I don't like to complain. I mean, I try to be as stoic as the next guy. But this was *unpleasant.*

Time and miles went by. Arturos sank and we were glad. At first. The dusk was cool and beautiful. The mountains turned innumerable shades of mauves, magentas, lilacs, lavenders and purples. The clouds vied with the mountains for glory. They weren't so limited and ranged into yellows, golds, oranges, reds, and an occasional peach as well as purples. We hoped we'd live to tell about it.

Night fell. We *couldn't* sleep. No question of that. But it grew too dark to walk.

"We can't sleep," I said.

"Yeah," Laura replied. "We can't keep going either."

"Food, then," said Paul, "that'll keep us busy a while."

"Yeah," I replied. "*Good* plan. Let's have a *pic*nic!" Stars were a-wink in the indigo sky, soft breezes blew, and we had an audience. About forty of them now. Soft-footed, silent, steadfast. Unswerving in their fidelity. Scary.

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Pretending to ignore them, we made a fire, spread ponchos to sit on and cooked freeze-dried food. Paul took out his pseudo-harp and played a tune. Soon Laura was singing, a lilting melody, beautifully poignant. I wondered cynically if it were the nearness of death or if I'd never really listened to Laura's singing. Whichever, it was lovely. (Lovely to die to?)

No one intended to die just yet, though. We ate, sang, tried not to think of the lethal intruders in camp. But we were constantly aware of them. They curled here and there like dogs. While we talked, about everything and nothing, in order to stay awake, they trilled soporifically like a cross between canary and purring cat. We wondered if it were intentional, to lull us.

I *did* tell Sherry I loved her forever (forever? what's that? that's how I feel about Sherry) and that we'd have those kids if we made it. We tried to cheer ourselves with plans for our riches, if we lived so long. We speculated about the psychovores themselves, cute dangerous little guys. We grew sleepy.

Sleepy is a hard way to grow if you can't sleep. Abso*lute*ly can't. Dare not. Must not. (And live.)

Sherry held my hand and I held hers. Death, imminent and frightful, gloating and dire, brings out feelings you'd never thought to have. Makes you say trite and . . . oh . . . *silly* things. Things about devotion and forever. Like in stories—as trite and as beautiful.

My life did *not* pass before me (whatever that means).

When Arturos's splendid dawn found us, we were awake. Groggy, tired, fatigue-drunk, but awake. And, therefore, alive both mentally and physically. The dawn was glorious—came up like thunder and all that. We didn't care. We simply didn't *care*.

There's no describing that blistering, blinding, bleak, and balefully glaring day. We hoped we were aiming for the city. So the compass and maps indicated. But, as hours go by and death gibbers over your shoulder (or trots faithfully at your side), you can wonder. We wondered if the compass worked. If the map were accurate. If we were able to read either.

And we walked. Miles, kilometers, feet, yards, leagues, rods, meters, cubits. All of them and more. Tired feet. Tired miles and kilometers and cubits, too. (Limping meters?) Tired, gritty, grungy, *and* tired. I wondered if I could go another step. And did. Wondered again. Kept walking.

The scenery was all of a sameness—rocks, desert plants, and distances with hills. We would struggle up a hill to see another just like the one before. And the one before that. More rocks, more dust,

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more blinding sunlight.

We went on. And on. And on. Soon (forever later) Arturos finally slid toward the mountain range again. Sweet, welcome, dangerous dusk approached. Welcome dusk, unwelcome night. Could we stay awake? Even if we stood all night? We had to—could we? Tired, we stopped. Looked at each other.

Then a thing I'll remember forever: without intending to, we were in a huddle, each hugging the others. I was crying. I was in love, in misery, in fear. I was overwhelmed: horror, joy, the myriad feelings that fill the heart when death and loved ones are both near. I could hardly breathe; I wanted to sing; I wept.

"We've got to be near," Sherry said, when we had calmed. "We know where we were, more or less, and we've travelled a long way. Surely we'll make it early tomorrow."

"If we live so long," I replied. "Or if there's intelligence left to guide us. Perhaps we'll all be sitting here giggling. Perhaps they'll've gotten us."

They were still with us, about forty. Affectionate, cute—if they hadn't been a menace.

"Don't talk like that!" Sherry snapped. I jumped. Sherry had *never* snapped at me. "Come *on*!" she ordered. "Make camp. We'll be all right! We're going to make it back tomorrow. It's time for dinner."

We sheltered under a tree—sheltered? From what? Death was near: following, surrounding, watching us. There were no storms. We did not need that tree.

But we huddled under the huge, feathery old giant, built a fire, cooked, and settled down to not sleep. We talked a while and grew sleepier. Paul played and we tried to sing, but music soothes: we were soon drowsier than ever.

Sherry started telling stories. She began with old ones, ones we'd heard often. Somehow she made them new . . . this time, in the fireglow beneath the tree on the desert, in the presence of death, she told them better. There was magic in the deathly air. Even the psychovores seemed to pay attention.

I was tired. Sherry was tired. We were *all* tired beyond description. We were bone weary, sore, our eyes hurt and feet ached. Everything ached. The night before, staying awake had been easier because of fear *for* rather than *of*. I'd found myself periodically roused by adrenaline rushes of terror, terror lest *Sherry* should sleep.

Tonight, though I loved her no less, I wasn't sure fear for her (or me) would suffice to keep me awake. Death, or even fates worse than death, began to seem appealing if they included sleep.

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But Sherry was a storyteller. (Never been an author—never will be.) She can tell a story to curl your toes, shorten your breath, open your eyes, set your heart to pounding faster. *And* keep you awake.

Still, eventually we began to droop. "We've *got* to stay awake," Sherry said, despairingly.

Paul roused. "Get up!" he cried. "Up! On your feet! Let's go! MOVE!"

Blearily, weakly, we stumbled up and at Paul's insistence we ran (*ran*, mind you—a thing I wouldn't have thought possible) around the tree. Then sat again, and Sherry resumed—we couldn't think of anything else so likely to keep us awake.

Sherry told stories. She gestured gracefully, building castles tall, giant beasts and swift spaceships. She made things fey, fierce, and fantastic. Her voice grew hoarse but still she told stories—Sherry was a storyteller and Sherry was our only hope.

All through that nightmarish night, while psychovores watched (eagerly? dispassionately? curiously?), stars wheeled in their appointed places, and we mortals struggled, Sherry told stories. Keeping our eyes and attention on her, she wove fantasies; made word and motion into life.

All *through* that nightmarish night I watched and wondered, listened rapt. How could she do it? Where the strength? I'll never know. But she never flagged or faltered.

At dawn, her voice almost gone, whispering, she said, "I've done what I could. We're still here. It's your turn. *Do* keep me awake."

We did. Somehow. All of us kept walking. To stop was to sleep (even if only for an instant) and to sleep (even if only for an instant) was worse than death.

In morning light we stumbled downhill, through a gate, into safety.

Sherry tells the story still, of how we walked out of the desert and how our escort of psychovores (what *do* they think? or mean?) stood in a semicircle to watch us go beyond the barrier which protected us from them. Sherry *is* a storyteller and she tells the story well.

Our children listen, entranced.

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PSYCHO-STARS

by Rory Harper

art: Patrick A. Lundquist

Mr. Harper tells us that this is the first story he's finished; consequently it's his first sale. He is 28 years old and is the house manager for a runaway house for teenagers in Houston. He's also a member in good standing of the Houston Science Fiction Society and a charter member of the Space City Writers' Ranch, one of those Clarion-model circles of merciless mutual criticism which budding writers so thrive on.

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As the senior science reporter at the *Times,* I occasionally have to deal with some pretty screwy types. You know, the guys that want to show you their perpetual motion machine, or tell you about how they deduced that the moon shots were all fakes. Stuff like that.

I handle them in different ways. If they seem interesting, I'll usually listen for a while, if I've got the time, then politely kiss them off. With others I have to be more forceful and hang up in mid-catharsis.

They always hit me up over the phone. That is, until the little guy walked up to my desk this morning.

"Are you Mr. Donaldson?" he inquired politely.

I pulled the pipe out of my mouth long enough to answer that I was indeed Mr. Donaldson.

"Good. Mind if I pull up a chair? I have some things I'd like to talk with you about." He didn't wait for permission.

"There are some changes about to be made, and I thought I'd better let the media in on it beforehand. One can always use a good press."

About this time I began to get an intuition that he was one of the nutcases. He didn't look wacky. Short little fella, slender, with thinning blond hair. Real young, maybe twenty-one or twenty-two. Wearing brown slacks and a white shirt. He might have been any of the college kids in the city.

We're a morning paper, and I'd already met my deadline for the next day's edition. He looked like he might be an intelligent kid, so I leaned back in my chair and started fiddling with the pipe preparatory to lighting it. I'll give almost anybody some of my time. You never know where you'll find a story.

"Okay, son," I said. "First, how about telling me your name?"

"God."

"I beg your pardon?"

"You can call me God," he said seriously. My face remained amiably bland, but inwardly I was groaning. Another one of the religious crazies. The kid didn't look the type at all. No funny haircut or anything. They'll fool you.

"All right. What is it you wanted to tell me?"

"Well, it's kind of embarrassing." He hesitated. "You see, there was a slip-up and your solar system has been without a Deity for several thousand years. I'm the new replacement. I just wanted you people to know that I'm here."

"Do tell." I puffed noncommittally.

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He squirmed in the chair. "I really am God. Honest. You know, lightning bolts and all." He held up his hands. Little arcs of electricity passed from finger to finger and back and forth between the hands. It made an interesting effect. I know several ways it could be done.

At least the guy was in there trying. Your normal weirdo doesn't think about something like that. He just expects you to take his unsupported word about his claims and might grow enraged if you handle him wrong. I began to entertain the notion that the guy wasn't really a nut, just somebody with an odd sense of humor playing an intricate joke. Might be a story in it.

"For the moment, let's accept the idea that you're God. Tell me a little bit about yourself. For background information."

He relaxed a little. He'd expected more hassle from me. Always keep them off balance if possible. It gives you more control of the interview.

"There's not much to tell yet. This is my first assignment. I'm fresh out of Deity School. But I got very good grades. I think I can do a righteous job, if given a chance." We both smiled at his little pun.

"Why are you talking to me, instead of the people over in the religion section? I'd think they'd be much more appropriate."

"Science *is* the religion here. Since the old God has been gone, your people have moved steadily away from respect for the mystical aspects of the universe, until now you believe that everything runs according to some rigidly deterministic and impersonal laws of physics. Spinoza's God has been in the ascendancy here for much too long." He was getting visibly upset. I clucked soothingly.

He wrung his hands for a moment, the little bolts twisting about them. He looked down at them. "Sorry. I don't have this Aspect totally under control yet. I assumed it recently."

"Anyway," he said more forcefully, "Things are Out of Control."

Funny how he could speak in capital letters like that. Few people have the talent.

"And you're going to correct them," I said.

"Certainly. That's what God is for, after all."

"What, specifically, do you plan?"

"I'm not sure yet. I just got here. I'll look things over for a while and come up with some suggestions. I think a return to a simpler, more pastoral lifestyle might be beneficial; but I'm open to ideas."

"What if people don't want to follow these suggestions of yours?" I asked.

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"Perhaps 'suggestions' wasn't the correct word." The little lightnings in his hands flared up momentarily.

"Um. Yes. I see. A couple of thousand years seems to be a long time for us to go without a Deity." Dammit, he had me capitalizing my words, too.

He looked embarrassed. "A clerical error. Nobody's perfect."

"That's not what He told us."

"I'm afraid He had a slight case of megalomania," he said defensively. "Understandable, given His circumstances, I'm sure you'll agree. As a matter of fact, certain mental illnesses are the main occupational hazards in our line of work."

"What happened to Him?" The pipe had gone out, as they always do. I started the process of relighting it.

"Gods live in the hearts of the stars which their planets circle," he said irrelevantly.

"How intriguing. I suppose that also makes you the God of Mars, Mercury, et cetera."

"Uh-huh. Which doesn't mean much, since they're all devoid of intelligent life. A few bacteria on Mars in scattered spots and some primitively organized amoeboids floating in the seas of Jupiter, along with the crystalline structures on Pluto, which might be alive or not, depending on your definitions. That about covers everything in your system. I'm afraid He tended to put all His eggs in one basket, so to speak. **Sigh.** I may change that in a few billion years."

"May I quote you on all of this? I'm sure the people at NASA will be delighted for you to save them the trouble of making all of those expensive probes," I said, deadpan.

"Certainly. This is all for publication. I have nothing to hide."

"I'll remember that. Now, about your predecessor . . . "

"Oh, yes. Well, the old God, Yahweh you called Him, seeded the planet with the first traces of life and then carefully nurtured it until your species emerged out of the competition. He was pretty beneficent, had things set up for you real nice. The Garden of Eden, as your legends called it. But He was in for some disappointments."

"I believe I heard about some of them," I said.

"Right. It made Him bitter. As He got older He became crotchety. Once or twice He wiped practically all of you out and started again with some carefully chosen breeding stock. It didn't do any good. He had evolved a stubborn and troublesome species and there wasn't much He could do about it, short of beginning the whole process over. He wasn't quite ready to do that. The usual procedure is to cause the star to go nova and sterilize the entire system. Rather

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drastic, and not often employed."

His first scientific mistake. I pounced. "I thought that novas could only occur with stars that are more massive than Sol. I did an article on novas and supernovas once," I added innocently.

He looked mildly irritated. "That's what I mean," he said. "That's where your science will lead you. You end up thinking that the cosmos operates on some sort of logical system. In fact, you might be better off if you would consider the psychological aspects of stellar evolution, rather than trying to figure out nuclear reactions in the stars."

"You're saying that the theories that our cosmologists have carefully evolved and tested are all a lot of hot air?"

"I wouldn't be so cruel. For one thing, they can't really test their theories directly, since they don't have access to the stars. For another, they've subscribed to Occam's Razor, and it's led them astray on occasion. You know what Occam's Razor is?" he asked.

"William of Occam postulated that if there are two or more theories that equally well explain the facts of a situation, the simpler theory is the correct one. Right?"

"Right." He nodded, pleased with me. "Well, an analogical look at the biology of your ecosphere should cause you to dismiss that notion out of hand. Nature will often take the *least* simple course in order to accomplish a given task. I ask you, is the kangaroo a reasonable example of the best way to go about solving the problems that it does? Are you yourselves? What is it that makes your existance even remotely probable?"

"Maybe there is some reasonable evolutionary explanation for these seemingly unlikely things," I said, baiting him. Most religious nuts go to pieces at the mention of the word "evolution."

He ignored it. "There *is* an explanation. Your God caused them. In a way, this answer even follows Occam's Razor. It is simple and elegant. It merely allows for conscious intervention in the process, instead of assuming some blind cosmic forces at work."

"How does all of this translate in terms of astrophysics?"

"Give me some examples," he said, leaning forward expectantly.

"You've already said that novae are attempts by Gods to start over with their planetary subjects."

"Usually. Sometime they happen as a God commits suicide. You can think of this as his home. If he stays in it while turning up the heat lethally, he dies inside it, ruptured by the accelerating nuclear events. If he steps outside after triggering the process, it just

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cleanses the planets. Then he moves back in after things cool down some."

"Interesting. Does the same hold true for supernovae?"

"Not exactly," he said. "As a matter of fact, Yahweh died in a supernova. He was visiting an old friend in another star and they had a serious disagreement. As I mentioned, He was getting older and had become a little unreasonable and grandiose. We'll never know exactly what happened. They must have started throwing around some pretty fearsome energy in the course of the dispute and triggered off a supernova reaction. Both perished. Some of the older Gods are really cranky, but you'll notice that supernovae are relatively rare."

"Uh-huh. How come you didn't immediately replace Him?"

"Nobody knew who'd died in the sun with the other God, Belthan. This was the supernova whose light reached your observers in 1054 A.D. For awhile it was one of the brightest objects in your skies, I believe," he said.

"How did you finally come to discover which star had lost its Deity?" I asked.

"Yahweh turned off the furnace, so to speak, when He went for His visit. He expected the house to stay warm while He was gone. Just trying to save a little fuel. He always was a miser." He looked at me sternly. "That's why it chapped Him so much that you all were wasting the potential and the resources that He'd arranged for you to have at your disposal. Anyway, He turned off the sun's core reactor. The main way to tell from the outside that the reactor is off is to see whether the sun is still emitting neutrinos. It took this long before the nearest monitoring station ceased receiving neutrinos from this sun."

"You have monitors set up specifically for this sort of situation?" I asked. Making everything I say into a question that leads the interviewee onward is an automatic habit by now. Most people never notice it, they're so flattered to have somebody interested, for once, in what they're saying.

"No, it was incidental information they acquired while performing other duties irrelevant to the discussion at hand."

"How about some of the other observed facts of stellar existance?"

"For instance?"

"Oh, tell me about Cepheid Variables," I said at random.

"You have to realize that stellar processes are often intimately tied up with the emotional states of their Gods," he said earnestly,

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"and that the more stable Gods have stars that are also stable. Cepheid Variables have Deities that are mildly manic-depressive. The even more variable stars have Gods with more severe cases of the disease. The most extreme of these are the stars that nova frequently. They are really sick, and tend to be impossible to please by their Life, no matter what the Life does."

"How about the little burnt out M-stars?"

"Old, tired, feeble Gods, let out to pasture, usually too senile to be able to nurture any life, but still trying."

"Neutron stars. Do they exist?"

"Yes, indeed," he said. "The closest equivalent in your species would be infantile regression, a drawing in of the boundaries as far as possible."

"That means there are no black holes. They draw themselves in even further."

"Not precisely. They go into another universe entirely, completely divorced and unreachable by everyone else. Catatonic withdrawal."

"So all of the stars have Gods living in them and they all have some sort of life on the planets, except those with really crazy Gods," I said.

"Almost. All of your large cities have houses in them which are abandoned or empty for some other reason. Also, you might think of the stars that have extremely short lives as being hotels. They provide a place for the God to stay, but burn up too rapidly to allow for the evolution of Life."

"Can't anybody do anything about the Gods with mental illnesses?" I asked.

"If they volunteer for help, but that's rare. A few of our therapists have attempted to coerce a God or two, with remarkably little success. You'll notice that many of the stars off the main sequence have another star associated with them, sometimes several other stars. These are the therapists. There aren't enough of them to go around. Therapy has a low cure-rate, I'm afraid. We usually wait until they've so depleted their energy, worn out by their disease, that they're more manageable. Some we simply have to give up on."

"That's terrible! Think of the cost in intelligent life in the waiting period."

"Your theologies which hold that your lives are sacred, or even of some individual value, are based on some false assumptions. If God loves life so much, why does He allow so much death?"

"Not a new thought," I grumped. "Surely there is some meaning, some afterlife we're being prepared for?"

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"Sorry. When you die, you die. Wave bye-bye."

"Then why are we here?"

"We're not sure. When a race has evolved sufficiently, in the right directions, they suddenly vanish, in some mysterious way, to some mysterious place where we can't follow."

"And it's your job to see that we evolve in the right direction," I said.

"Yeah. Think of us as farmers that grow a crop until it harvests itself. Then we start over."

"Why do you do this?"

"It is what we do best. Isn't that why you do what you do?"

"Um. You got me there. If all of this is true, where do *you* come from?"

An acutely embarrassed look settled on his face. "We don't know," he said in a low voice. "We have some ideas, but we can't find out for sure. We think somebody from higher up is withholding crucial information. It's very frustrating. Unexplainable things happen."

"A pity." In a deranged sort of way, the little guy was really sincere in his discomfort. I decided to change the subject.

"Why are you letting out all of this stuff, anyway?" I said.

"It's the explanation your people can accept at this stage of their development."

"You mean all of this hasn't been true?"

"No, it's all true, but it's edited a little to leave out the parts that you wouldn't be able to comprehend. As an example, surely you don't believe I really look like this, do you?" He indicated his body with his crackling hands. "You wouldn't even be able to see me if I tried to show you my true appearance. I exist in several dimensions that you aren't able to perceive. How else do you think I could exceed the speed of light in getting here?"

"Einstein was right?"

"Relatively." He grinned. "His theories hold true for the reality that you can see now. Heisenberg was righter, though. We *do* play dice, or our equivalent of them."

I tapped the consumed dottle out of my pipe into the ashtray on my desk and started reloading. I was impressed by this guy. Crazy as a loon, but at least he stayed internally consistent, something most of us who are 'sane' have trouble managing.

"Why have you chosen me, specifically, to receive all of this information?" I asked.

"Right now I'm talking to people like you all over the planet. Some of the conversations were brief, to say the least. They shooed

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me away and missed their chance at the story of the millennium. It's a time-honored method for letting the Life in on impending changes. Yahweh used prophets who were influential in their communities when He planned to spring something new. I use the equivalent, the media. Whether or not you choose to use the story is up to you. I'm simply trying to give you the chance to make some adjustments in your outlook. Enough will believe me that the story will get out. Anyway, there will be Portents shortly; and I will make my Plans Manifest."

I needed to get back to work. Time for the kiss-off. "Okay. Thank you, God. I'll make my decisions and we'll see whether it gets printed or not. I'd have to get it past several editors, you know." I started to pick up a few papers on my desk.

"Whatever." He stood up. "It's up to you. I can't interfere with your free will on an individual level without really screwing up your race's evolution."

"Well, thanks for giving me the story and your time," I said.

"You're welcome. I may use you again. You listen well, even though you don't believe me. I think I'll give you a nudge toward the Truth." There he went with another capital.

He leaned over and stuck a pinky finger in the bowl of my pipe. When the pinky came out, the tobacco in the pipe was smouldering evenly. Another neat trick. He smiled boyishly, turned, and threaded his way through the City Room.

Strange person.

A few minutes later the phone rang. It was Freddy Connors. A chill chased down my back as soon as I knew it was him on the line. I went to MIT with Freddy. He's an electronics engineer who now works in a mine in Utah, in a project involved in detecting certain types of neutrino emission from the sun. The project is deep underground, almost a mile, in order to shield the detector from stray radiation that would give false readings. The neutrinos themselves are highly penetrant and will go through almost anything without being affected at all

"Hey, Fred. How you doing?" I said, with as much heartiness as I could muster.

"Fine, Jimmy. Thought I'd give you a little scoop." He sounded excited. "You know how we've had this damn p-p chain neutrino detector running without any visible results whatsoever? We thought maybe that meant the nuclear reactions at the core had died. Or else we were doing something drastically wrong. Well, today

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when I came to work, everybody was going nuts. We're getting neutrinos! Lots of them!"

I didn't say anything.

"Jim, you hear me? The detector works! The sun's core is burning."

"Guess the new owner has turned on the furnace again," I muttered.

"Huh?"

"Ah, sorry, Fred. I'm kind of distracted with some stuff right now. Congratulations and felicitations." I thought for a moment. "Is there any reason the detector would be working now when it wasn't before?"

"Beats me. We didn't change anything. It just didn't have any neutrinos to detect until today," he said.

I talked with him for a few more minutes, jotting down the details he gave me.

After he hung up, I immediately dialed the number of Diego Tortes, the science editor of the *Daily News*. I asked him if he'd had some guy come up to him today claiming to be God.

"Funny you should mention that," he said. "Somebody did do that, about a half an hour ago. I ran him off. I'm a very busy man, Jimmy."

I took the hint and rang off. I called newsmen in a dozen different cities. Ten of them had been approached today. Four had listened. They'd had a good laugh and then gone back to work.

I am about ready to take this piece to my editor. I'm a born-again agnostic. But I'm also a newsman. If he doesn't have me put away out of hand, you may be reading this in the next edition of the *Times*.

I'm convinced *something* impossible is happening. No, I wasn't converted by the trick with his hands or by his lighting my pipe with his pinky. And I think Freddy Connors calling me when he did was pure coincidence. Everybody else in the business will have his news shortly, anyway. Someone who knows more about it than I do could probably come up with some explanation as to why the detector didn't work until today.

All of those similar people talking to newsmen across the country could be part of some elaborate hoax carried out for unknown reasons.

But I've been smoking my pipe continuously for the past five hours. I even doused it in the sink in the men's room for a few minutes.

And it won't go out. The tobacco in it burns merrily away without

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being consumed. I guess He's not into flashy miracles.

Maybe we've been contacted by a member of a truly bizarre alien race, one with delusions of grandeur. Maybe I received a message directly from God. I don't know.

Either way, we'll know for sure shortly. There will be Portents, and His Plans will be made Manifest.

COSMIC COWBOYS

If,
like an endless cavalcade of cowboys
fading forever into the sunset,

  one-tenth of the universe
  has already been bushwacked
  and swallowed by black holes,

then
black holes must be
the outlaws of outer space,

  relentlessly rustling matter
  corraling energy
  and lassoing light

across the astral plains
of the remote frontiers of space.

—Peter Payack

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THE SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR
by Erwin S. Strauss

The weather will be getting better soon, so there's no excuse for not getting out to a social weekend with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. Check into a con(vention) near you soon. For a longer, later list, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an addressed, stamped envelope at: 9850 Fairfax Sq. #232, Fairfax VA 22031. For the latest news, call (703) 273-6111. If a machine answers, leave your number CLEARLY and I'll call back. When writing cons, enclose an addressed, stamped envelope. Look for me at cons in my Filthy Pierre persona.

PenultiCon. For info, write: **Box 11545, Denver CO 80211.** Or phone: **(303) 433-9774** (10 AM to 10 PM only, not collect). Con will be held in: Denver CO (if location omitted, same as in address) on: 22-24 Feb., 1980. Guests will include: Vonda (Dreamsnake) McIntyre, Hal (Mission of Gravity) Clement, Ed Bryant. From the folks who'll bring you Denvention.

HoosierCon, c/o Parrotte, Box 354, Mishawaka IN 46544. (219) 232-1685. South Bend IN, 29 Feb.-2 March. Robert (Another Fine Myth) Asprin, Juanita and Robert (Buck) Coulson.

WisCon, c/o SF3, Box 1624, Madison WI 53701. (608) 233-0236. 7-9 March. Octavia Butler, Joan Vinge, David Hartwell, and Bev DeWeese. The leading feminist-oriented SF convention.

HalCon, Box 3174 South, Halifax NS B3J 3H5. 7-9 March. A. E. (Slan) Van Vogt, Alfred (Demolished Man) Bester, Spider and Jeanne Robinson. At scenic St. Mary's University.

CoastCon, Box 6025, Biloxi MS 39532. (601) 392-4176. 14-16 March (not in hurricane season).

MonCon, Mountainlair SOW, WV U., Morgantown WV 26505. (504) 283-4833. 14-16 March.

MidWesterCon, c/o Russell, 50 Capri Dr., Florissant MO 63033. (314) 921-5527. Hazelwood (near St. Louis) MO, 14-16 March. Phyllis Eisenstein. Promoted by local school district.

LunaCon, Box 204, Brooklyn NY 11230. (212) 252-9759. Hasbrouck Heights NJ, 14-16 March. Larry Niven, Vincent DiFate, Nobel laureate Dr. Rosalyn S. Yalow. Near New York City.

AggieCon, Box 5718, College Station TX 77844. (713) 845-1515. 27-30 March. Poul Anderson.

NorWesCon, Box 24207, Seattle WA 98124. (206) 244-5929. 28-30 March. Alfred (Stars My Destination) Bester, Fred (Way the Future Was) Pohl. Northwest SF Society's annual con.

AlbaCon, c/o Gillin, 9 Dunottar St., Glasgow, Scotland, UK. 4-6 April. Colin Kapp, James White, Jim Barker. Annual British EasterCon. I'll be listing more overseas cons here from now on.

UniCon, c/o Monash Univ. SF Assn., Wellington Rd., Clayton 3168 Vic., Australia. 4-7 April. Joe (Forever War) Haldeman. The Australian original, as opposed to the newer U.S. UniCon.

EuroCon, c/o Editrice Nord, Via Rubens 25, I-20148 Milano, Italy. Stresa, Italy, 1-4 May. 1980 European continental con. Charter flight info: Finder, Box 428, Latham NY 12110.

WesterCon 33, Box 2009, Van Nuys CA 94104. Los Angeles CA, 4-6 July. Roger Zelazny, Bob Vardeman, Frank Denton. The 1980 edition Western con. A good warmup for NorEasCon II.

NorEasCon II, Box 46, MIT PO, Boston MA 02139. 29 Aug.-1 Sept., 1980. Knight, Wilhelm, and Pelz. The 1980 WorldCon. Go to a few smaller cons first to prepare yourself for this.

WesterCon 34, c/o McLeod, 6745 Gold Run Ave., Sacramento CA 95842. July 4th weekend, 1981.

Denvention II, Box 11545, Denver CO 80211. 2-7 Sept., 1981. C. L. Moore, Clifford Simak, R. Heveiin, Ed Bryant. The 1981 WorldCon. It's not too early to start planning vacations.

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ONE KIDNAPPED CLICKA

by John Kelly

art: Karl B. Kofoed

Mr. Kelly, now 21, has a novel, After the Age of Wizards, *making the rounds. His story, "Davidson, Shadow Slayer," appeared in the third issue of* Asimov's SF Adventure Magazine *and was well received there. A full-time student at Harvard, the author now neither raises nor races armadillos.*

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"So what are you saying? That the planetary people can't ever understand our problems, just 'cause they never lived out in empty space?"

"Of course not. Marx was too vulgar a Marxist for me." The fatter man dragged the netted animal up the ramp into the starcraft.

"Well, be careful!" said the shorter man as the fatter man bumped the animal over the rim of the hatch. "The thing deserves some respect."

The fatter man snorted. "These things don't deserve anything special." He shook the Clicka baby out of the net and onto the warm floor. "It's what we make them into that deserves respect. Out in the wild they don't even think."

The Clicka crawled sideways, her soft beak unaccountably moist.

"Bull," said the shorter man. He punched a button which drew in the ramp and slid shut the hatch.

"It's true! Out there they're nothing. No language, nothing that's not rudimentary."

"You rationalize everything."

"But it's true." The fatter man climbed the ladder into the main-space. The shorter man looked back at the crawling Clicka. Then he climbed up the ladder after the fatter man.

The Clicka blinked. Her grey fur had been twisted and matted by the net. She didn't feel hurt. She didn't feel anything exactly. Something was empty. She couldn't find–something else wasn't there.

Out in the brush, down the long path of grass shafts broken by the dragged net, the Clicka's thirty-one parents were gathered by her tall nest. They'd woven the nest themselves, for their baby, and now they cried. The nurses were badly wounded; the baby was gone. They would all be part dead forever. They cried on each other, on themselves.

They all knew what had happened, for some had seen the men's path. They knew, but they didn't understand.

The Clicka's beak hardened swiftly, as swiftly as she learned. She learned about the shorter man and the fatter man, about warm metal rooms and about hearing and thinking. Soon enough she was thinking herself, thinking when the men thought and thinking what the men thought. When the Clicka tried her very hardest, and when everything was silent, she could hear the flowing of people's thoughts. The shorter man taught her that it wasn't hearing exactly, but she couldn't tell the difference.

The shorter man also taught her why she could hear other people's

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thoughts. She could hear them because it was her job to tell her master what other people were thinking. They would practice; the Clicka would say out loud to the shorter man everything she heard in the fatter man, then say to the fatter man what she heard in the shorter man. It got easy to talk when people supplied the words, even if her beak did click on every "b" and "p." They taught her to speak only when asked to.

She knew things the way humans knew things. She didn't remember much, but that didn't matter since they remembered everything that was important. Then one day another shiny ship flew near the one she lived in, and a person floated across to their hatch. Abruptly new thoughts were in the Clicka's world. *She was getting stronger,* the fatter man had thought; *she'd soon be able to hear thoughts across incredible distances of empty space.*

The woman named Kadrasa brusquely slipped out of her spacesuit and climbed the ladder to the mainspace. *It's about time they got me one of these damn animals,* she thought. "Let's be quick," she said.

"Don't worry," said the fatter man, "we're as anxious to get rid of this Clicka as you are to get her." The words pushed into the Clicka like icy fingers.

"I just want to get out of here," said Kadrasa, looking down at the shorter man. "When I stay places I get caught." *At least it's no trap,* she thought. *And they're not getting any more money.*

"She'll be a good Clicka," said the fatter man.

"She better be. We're leaving." Kadrasa pulled the Clicka to the ladder.

"Wait," said the shorter man. *I've messed this up,* he thought.

Kadrasa turned very quickly. "I paid you in advance. What?"

The shorter man shrugged. "Nothing. You paid us in advance." *At least, if a patrol stops us we'll be clean,* he thought.

Kadrasa pushed the Clicka onto the ladder. Then she pushed her into the shorter man's spacesuit and dragged her through the hatch and along the wire connecting the ships. *Should I kill them?* Kadrasa thought. *They didn't cheat me. They wouldn't gain anything by telling a patrol where I was. By then I'll have jumped far anyway. And I don't need anything on their ship. No.*

Kadrasa pulled the shorter man's spacesuit off the Clicka. It had chafed against her knees, her crotch, her beak. She was much too small and it didn't fit right. She stumbled out onto the cold floor. "Let's go," said Kadrasa, "You're my Clicka now."

She followed Kadrasa down the hall, flooded with thoughts as the crewmen peered around corners to see what a Clicka looked like.

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She was Kadrasa's Clicka now.

She was Kadrasa's Clicka for years.

For Kadrasa it was her job to hear across the spaces between ships, to tell Kadrasa what the other captains were thinking. She told Kadrasa what the Earthman Dragen wanted, and then Kadrasa arranged the Great Swindle. She told Kadrasa which pilot wasn't watching, and then Kadrasa stole a Pan-Galactic Patrol Cruiser. And finally, when Kadrasa was running overloaded and a Patrol Cruiser ran her down, the Clicka told her when the Captain planned to fire a Total; and Kadrasa was able to bounce it back and destroy the cruiser.

But then Kadrasa was worried. They would want her badly. Her ship had to lighten, and she needed her cargo. So she jettisoned half her crew. And the Clicka was a luxury that couldn't be afforded.

She had been Kadrasa's Clicka, and it seemed to cut into her and rip her apart to hear Kadrasa think to kill her. But then Kadrasa didn't kill her: she jettisoned her alive. The Clicka floated through space amidst boxes and bodies.

The spacesuit still didn't fit, but she had pulled herself up near the helmet, and she could hear thoughts from farther than ever before. She could hear Kadrasa's pirates running away and grumbling of mutiny for what she'd done to their friends.

She could hear the thoughts of bored battle crews, as a whole corps of the new Interceptor crafts lay in wait at Beta I, Kadrasa's next refueling station. *Kadrasa will be looking for us,* one Captain thought bitterly. *And she'll think we're here as a result of the destruction of Smitty's Cruiser. She'll never realize that we were going to trap her anyway.*

And the Clicka could also hear Kadrasa, still wondering why the cruiser Captain had fired a Total instead of attacking more conservatively. She should have asked.

The Clicka still remembered Captain Smith's thoughts, from when she had been searching them for Kadrasa. *The net on Beta I will get them if I don't,* he had thought. *So forget trying to wound her, or trap her here and wait for help. Those goddamned Interceptors would get all the credit anyway. She's probably about to jump. Go for the kill!* And the Clicka remembered that Captain Smith had died.

Then the Clicka reached past the flying ships, reached down towards the planet itself. It was faint at first but space was so quiet that the Clicka could focus and focus and then she heard the

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thoughts of a whole planet of people. The people thought not of cruisers and Kadrasa and pirating, but of other things the Clicka had seldom thought. The Clicka roamed a sea of work and play.

The Clicka had never had so many thoughts to hear before, so many people to become, in the short visits she made to their minds. She would last long, here in space–she didn't each much, and with the air regenerators she'd starve before suffocating. She would live for weeks.

Before the day was over, she was witness to the mutiny on Kadrasa's ship. And she heard Kadrasa floating in space, happy to die free. The Clicka loved to think with Kadrasa.

But her attention turned to the Interceptors when she heard their crews getting excited. *The trap is sprung,* one of the young Interceptor Captains thought. Then she could hear the confusion and anger in Kadrasa's crew, after their ship had been suddenly pulled to a halt in empty space. *The anti-wall,* thought the young Captain. *It got them before they even saw us.*

The Clicka heard the helpless crew surrendering, as the corps of Interceptors closed in. All of the pirates' thoughts were morbid. She returned to live longer in the angry thoughts of Kadrasa.

But then the next day she heard new thoughts approaching. It was the young Captain, and his ship was searching for something. His crew was reading a log, and checking co-ordinates. They showed him a chart. *Here and there,* he thought, *Kadrasa and her Clicka.*

She heard Kadrasa angry about being saved. Then hours later the Interceptor's large scoop pulled the Clicka into safety.

Everyone treated the Clicka much more nicely than they treated Kadrasa. Kadrasa's thoughts were all very black. But then they sent the Clicka to another ship, a hospital ship.

Don't be surprised if you don't see anyone for a while, thought the wire-haired man standing before her. She knew him; he was Stevenson, the psychoanalyst. He thought towards her the way he talked to other people: flatly, in only one tone and with gaps separating the parts of his sentences. And she knew why. It was his work, part of his life, to understand other people exactly as they are. To do so, he had to impose himself on them as little as possible, to keep them from acting in ways they've chosen just because they think he expects it. He projected no personality, and received only natural ones back.

She understood all that because he told her. He addressed himself to her in his thoughts–he was the only one ever to do that. But he

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made it so hard for her, to think with him. He put forward so little to think as.

I'll be putting you in a room, where you can't hear the rest of us, out here, he thought. *I just want you to relax for a while,* he thought. She followed him through a door marked with three red stripes. When he closed the door behind them everything was very quiet.

Tell-her-the-stories, he thought to himself. *This room* (he turned to her) *was designed with the help of—* He thought something she didn't understand. *–of other Clickas.* She sat down in a green felt armchair that was just her size. *Good,* Stevenson thought, *She-chose-on-her-own-to-sit-there. Initiative. She-has-to-develop-herself-more. But-she-hears-this–* He sat on a wooden chair across from her.

We don't really understand how you hear thoughts, what it is that you hear. And we don't really understand how the walls of this room keep you from it. But the– (Again he thought that thing she didn't understand.) *–designed it, for us, from things found on your planet. Your home planet. Mostly rocks and sticks and leaves, in these walls. All painted with a sort of putty that the Clickas mixed on your home.*

I don't know what you remember–no-of-course. She-thinks-so-little-on-her-own-that-she-won't-remember-any-of-it–about the early days of your life, on your home planet. But the pirates (She sensed his violent hatred for them.) *found out that you Clickas have this extraordinary talent for understanding thoughts. Every year they steal more of you from the nests, when you are still infants. Then they raise you so wrong. (Again she sensed his anger.) Make you into the tormented things you are.*

They make you think like they think. Like I think. Only you aren't supposed to do that; you can't do that on your own. So you have to do it from *other people's thoughts,* with *other people's thoughts,* as *other people. They have twisted your incredible empathy* (Now she sensed his admiration.) *into a punishing, unquenchable need. You have to forget. You have to stop thinking. Just relax for a while, and try not to think.*

He got up and moved to the door, and everything was very quiet. The Clicka ran after him and grabbed his hand. "Please stay!" she said out loud. "I like it, listening to you."

The man sighed. *Tell-her-more-about-what's-coming. The-next-few-days-will-hurt-her. Sit down in your chair,* he thought. He followed her and sat again on the wooden chair before her. *Right now, you think as I do. You talked as I do. Inside you want to be me, you are me in what you want, when you think. Only I don't want you to*

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be me when you think.

This last thought made the Clicka begin to twitch. *It's bad for you, to think like other things you aren't. Especially people–God, we're-all-so-incomplete.* She felt a wave of hopelessness wash over him. And she felt like she was tearing herself apart. *This-is-only-hurting-her,* he thought. *To-think-that-those-bastards-could-so-abuse-such-a-beautiful-creature. Clicka. You will get better. You will become a better thing than any of those things you have thought. those people, me, Kadrasa. But you must forget words. You must forget the word "I" especially. Forget "I," forget "me." Want you to. Want you to stay and rest.*

Stevenson got up and left. With him outside and the door shut, the world was very quiet. Quiet, quiet. She climbed down from the green chair and sat on the wooden one. *Now you must forget about words, about "I" and "me" especially,* she thought. But she was talking to something else, not her sitting there. She was only talking to the chair.

The room was quiet. She climbed into the green chair again. The felt was soft, the shape just right. The room was so quiet. It was easy to be quiet like the room. She fell asleep.

How do you feel?

"I feel–" she stopped.

She's-searching-for-an-answer. Searching-me. But-that's-to-be-expected. Dammit, I-can't-help-but-talk-to-her. Every-time-I'm-here-she'll-fix-onto-me. But-she-looks-so-hurt. Such-a-beautiful-animal. He smoothed down her head fur and scratched behind her ears. *That's-why-this-is-my-job, should-be-mine. I-can-teach-them-to-love-themselves. Themself. But-she-must-stop-objectifying-herself. Self-consciousness-is-alienation.* When he thought it, she understood. *I must go. I can only say to you, try to change. And tomorrow we'll arrive at my home city. You'll be getting a new friend tomorrow afternoon.* He left food in the room and thought that she should eat before she went to sleep. She did.

She woke up the next day when the door opened. But Stevenson didn't come in. Only his arms did, putting something down. *Don't worry, Bruce, you'll be safe,* he thought. He wasn't thinking it to her. *You'll like her,* he thought. He took his hands away from the thing and closed the door. It was a four-footed animal with big floppy feet and black fur.

The Clicka and the puppy looked at each other. They were both afraid, but neither seemed a threat. "Bruce," she said. Then they

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both wanted to play. The puppy barked; the Clicka barked back. Then the Clicka jumped down from her chair, and the puppy romped over.

The puppy jumped up onto the Clicka, and the Clicka fell over backwards. The puppy jumped again, for the Clicka's nose; but he landed short. His paw fell on the Clicka's beak and the Clicka bit down playfully. "Grrr," she said in mock menace. Together they jumped and tackled each other and bit each other's fingers and the puppy licked the Clicka's beak. They wanted very much to please each other.

Finally they both got tired enough to sleep. The puppy slept wrapped in the Clicka's arms.

Later the door opened. The puppy pulled away from the Clicka and stood two steps away, his tail sticking straight up. Stevenson stepped through the door.

"Rup," said the puppy.

"Rep," said the Clicka.

The man smiled. *It's-the-best-I-can-do-for-the-moment. If-she's-thinking-at-all-she's-thinking-quite-differently-now.* Before he could leave the room they were both climbing his legs and gnawing on his fingers. He tried to think like a puppy as they wrestled on the floor.

"Ruff," he said.

"Rep," the Clicka replied.

But then the puppy was gone and the Clicka sat alone. She sat on the wooden chair, but the thinking was hard. She jumped to the floor and leaned on her hands. "Rep," she said. The Clicka looked around the room. "Rep," she said again. Then she climbed into her chair and watched the quiet room.

Stevenson was back in the room when she woke up. He held another animal, something smaller than Bruce which sat curled in his lap. *We moved this room, during the night. Put it in the Cruiser. We're on our way to your planet, now. The Clicka's planet.* He thought the thing that she didn't understand again.

But it was harder to follow him anyway. She focussed her attention on the thing in his lap. *Good,* he thought; *she-doesn't-give-me-as-much-attention.* The thing in his lap was making a soft, happy noise as he stroked it. Then he picked it up and put in on the ground. *This is Muff,* he said.

The Clicka looked carefully at the cat. She listened very hard to

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hear the animal's–not thoughts, exactly, but the same anyway. Feelings, impulses. The cat stood quietly on the floor while Stevenson walked to the door. As he opened the door the Clicka climbed down and crawled to the cat. All three waited, frozen.

Abruptly, the cat's back reared up and the animal hissed. It raked its paw across the Clicka's beak, and then darted across the room and out the open door. The Clicka cried.

Stevenson held the shaking, shuddering Clicka for a long time before he left the room. Later, he came back with Bruce.

Can't-tell-if-this-helps-or-hurts-the-Clicka, Stevenson thought, *and-probably-nothing-I-can-do-can-do-very-much-of-either. At-least-they-both-seem-happy-together.* The dog's tail wagged fruriously when he saw the fur-covered Clicka.

The Clicka and the puppy played together often, as the Cruiser ran onward. It was hard to say what the Clicka was thinking like, Stevenson thought. It was hard to say what the final effect of the animals would be on her. But he just had to wipe away her human type of consciousness. Could a pirate Clicka, once *self*-conscious and aware of being separate, ever make it back? Stevenson felt helpless as they neared the Clickas' planet.

When the Clicka stepped out of the room with the green felt chair, the world rushed at her from all sides. Its smells and noises and bright colors were enough; the cascading thoughts and feelings frightened her. She pulled closer to Stevenson and reached upwards towards Bruce, who lay tailthumping in Stevenson's arms.

Stevenson hurried her down a long plastic hallway, away from the rooms with all the people in them. Her short legs couldn't keep up with his long ones, so he waited. He brought her into a small metal room with flashing lights, and the door sucked shut behind them. He pushed some other buttons and the air whooshed as another door opened. The new air was cold and bright. It was a door to the outside.

Stevenson led the Clicka down the ramp. The air smelled clean and wet. Tall dark trees covered most of the land, but in the clearing the wide-bladed grass was short and the sun bright.

Another Clicka stood at the bottom of the ramp.

Bruce barked, and Stevenson quieted him. Kadrasa's Clicka stood shyly by Stevenson, as the other Clicka waited. It was a tall animal, with thick brown fur and soft eyes. *She's-not-going-to-make-it,* Stevenson thought. *Go ahead, Clicka. Approach the other.*

The Clicka stepped forward shyly. The other Clicka was open to

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her. Not–not thinking, or feeling, or wanting something. Not seeing her as herself, not talking about anything or being anything. No, the other Clicka *was* something, but it wasn't like Stevenson, like Bruce. It wasn't itself–he, the other Clicka should be a he. But he wasn't. He was just a part of something larger–no, he was the larger thing, the small body was a part but he was also the rest.

Kadrasa's Clicka didn't understand. It wasn't, he wasn't, thinking or feeling or anything the way things were supposed to be.

The other Clicka stepped forward, and reached out to touch Kadrasa's Clicka. But she backed away, and hunched up her neck. She screamed her cat-scream, and swiped the new Clicka across the beak. Then she ran up the ramp.

Stevenson said something to the bleeding Clicka at the end of the ramp, and then ran upward to rejoin Kadrasa's Clicka. Kadrasa's Clicka was shaking and whimpering. Bruce licked her face.

I know. You don't understand. You can't understand. You aren't you. The real you isn't separate. You're supposed to be what he is. You belong to a part of the greater body. But the Clicka was giving most of her attention to Bruce.

The Clicka was back in the green felt chair. She hadn't seen Bruce for days. Stevenson was there again.

You have two choices, Clicka. You can remain what you are. You can be my housepet. Or you can stay here, out in the sunlight, and try to become what you are supposed to be.

"Bruce," said the Clicka.

"I don't want you to be Bruce!" Stevenson yelled. It was the first time he had spoken to her. "Don't you understand? Bruce is just a dog! You belong as a part of it, that beautiful thing on this planet. Our psychological terms don't even apply here. You should be able to feel everything, to feel complete! How can you want to be the copy of a housepet?"

The Clicka shuddered. Stevenson carried her though the airlock, dumped her on the ramp, and left her there. He went back into the ship, and watched on a videowindow. He held his breath. The Clicka stumbled down the ramp and into the field. On all fours, she crawled into the forest. Stevenson sighed.

When the Clicka hadn't returned after a week, the Cruiser left.

The others found Kadrasa's Clicka. She barked like Bruce. "Rep," she said. They opened it to her, their self, and she saw it again. She saw it but she wasn't it. So she just followed along as they travelled

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their migratory trails, as they pulled down the great blackwood fruit and passed it around, as they slept in the great circles, arms intertwined.

At first she was Bruce. Then she tried to be it, what they were. She did what they did and marvelled at how natural it all seemed. She could reach the fruit they reached for, pull away the fronds they pulled away, and build the same nest. It was as if she knew how to do it. And she could look at them and see herself and think she finally understood. But then she would listen hard, grab for their thoughts; and at once the pain would come. Not pain–terror ripped her thoughts. It was her own scream hurting her inside, because she touched something she couldn't: a thought that wasn't, that she couldn't understand. It made her shiver, shake, it ripped at her from behind her thoughts. She couldn't touch them and be her at the same time.

And it hurt them too. They knew. They touched her and smoothed her fur and and cleaned her face the way they cleaned each other, but they knew no way to try to be any closer.

At night when they all slept together, Kadrasa's Clicka slept apart. While the Clickas slept, Kadrasa's Clicka lay wrapped in horrible dreams, of floppy white pirate Clicka dogs talking to her in the dark. While the Clickas slept the psychoanalyst's Clicka dreamed horrible dreams of seeing herself from the outside, of the world spread out like an ocean inside of her and of herself melted away into the dark ocean of space. The lone Clicka woke often, in the terrible nights, while the others slept on.

When the young were to be born the lone Clicka was passed to a different troop, so that she would not infect the parts still with soft beaks. But the Clickas never drove her any farther away from themself. They didn't, and they could feel her pain because they were her even if she wasn't them. And they kept hoping, but the terror never ended for her, and then she died.

They buried her in the right place, together with all the parts whose time had ended. They cried for her bitterly; they cried for all the parts who were taken away and never came back home.

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MISSING THE POINTS
by Chuck McMichael

Mr. McMichael notes that while in real life he is a computer programmer for America's leading manufacturer of glass block, in really *real life he writes gags for cartoonists. This story is his first sale to a science fiction magazine.*

The war between the hemispheres was not going well for the West. It would soon be going worse if Dr. Milano did not recover his package. The Swiss customs agent looked at him blankly. A few feet away, the Indian fakir stared through squinting eyes.

"The Indian fellow says you stole his bed of nails. What's your story?" The customs agent turned to a new page in his notebook.

"It doesn't belong to him and it's not a bed of nails," Milano replied. "It's a five-kiloprong dehumidifying personnel support device."

"Could you spell that?" asked the agent.

"It's all very simple. Since nuclear war is out of the question due to its effects on the earth's ozone layer, and since the Eastern Hemisphere now has all the world's petroleum, the only way the West can win a conventional war is through unconventional means. You don't mind if we win the war, do you?"

"We're neutral," said the Swiss agent.

"I realize that," replied Dr. Milano. "Anyway, to win the war we must be able to teleport men and arms to the East. And for our teleporters to work we need very low humidity, something like ten billionths of a percent. So while we're freeze-drying the exteriors of the troops in their protective suits, they need something to stand on, something that will keep the bottoms of their shoes from getting wet. That's why we need a mat with five thousand prongs of anhydrous zirconium on the floor of the transporter. I was taking the prototype back to Washington when this Eastern spy made off with it. They're desperate for it. We're desperate for it. The fate of the world hinges on it."

The customs agent ran his fingers lightly over the mat. "These prongs sure look like nails to me."

Dr. Milano exploded in frustration. "Blast it! Don't you realize? These are the tines that dry men's soles."

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THE BOOK OF BARABOO

by Barry B. Longyear

art: Jack Gaughan

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BALLYHOO

Officer Horth Shimsiv closed his weary, green-lidded eyes and brought his scaled head up from the hand-written book as his right fist came down hard upon the rude wooden table. "By the tail of the Mighty Gonzor! Is there no simple way to obtain a simple answer from a human?!" He sensed a presence to his right, looked in that direction, then came to a stiff parade position of attention. "My . . . my apologies, Major Smith. An unthinking outburst." He swallowed and held out his hand toward the half-read tome before him. "It's just that . . . that . . ."

The major, clad in the red blouse and black trousers of the Ninth Quadrant Admiralty Office, relaxed a frown and then nodded his head. "No apologies are necessary, Lieutenant. I often feel the same way." Major Smith waved a hand toward the stool upon which Shimsiv had been sitting. "Relax, Lieutenant. Please."

Officer Shimsiv swallowed again, then resumed his seat on the painfully short stool. "Thank you, sir." Smith was less of a disciplinarian than most of the humans Shimsiv served under in the Admiralty Office; but with the scaleless bipeds in control of the Quadrant Assembly, it never hurt to spread it on thick, humans being the touchy sort they were. "And, sir, again I ask you, please excuse my outburst—"

"Never mind that, Shimsiv. Consider the incident closed." Smith moved until he was standing on the opposite side of the wooden table. He tapped the book with the forefinger of his right hand. "Have you managed to glean any information from that yet?"

Shimsiv returned his gaze to the yellowed pages and sighed. His eyes were tired and he felt the beginnings of a tension cramp in the middle of his tail. "Well, sir, not much. It confirms the Admiralty records on Earth, insofar as the starship *City of Baraboo* being constructed by the old Arnheim & Boon shipyard is concerned. It also confirms the purchase of the ship by one John J. O'Hara, owner of O'Hara's Greater Shows, fifty-six standard years ago; but . . ."

"But what?"

"The account here is in considerable variance with the Admiralty Office Investigation Division's report that was filed back then."

Major Smith nodded. "Situation normal . . ."

Shimsiv frowned. "Sir?"

"The beginning of an expression." Major Smith rubbed his chin, and looked down at the book. "Is there anything else related to our investigation?"

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Shimsiv shook his head. "Thus far, Major, it is just an accounting of O'Hara's circus's beginnings on Earth and its performances on a number of Ninth Quadrant planets—"

"Back to work, then, Lieutenant. I need some answers and I need them fast."

Shimsiv studied the expression on the human's face. "Is something wrong, sir?"

Major Smith nodded. "O'Hara's was the first starshow circus; therefore, our activities have drawn the attention of all of the human populated planets—particularly Earth. The Quadrant Assembly appears to be turning this into a political issue, and now there's some question as to our jurisdiction in the matter at all. . . ." Smith rubbed the back of his neck. "That's why I dropped by, Lieutenant."

"Sir?"

"I have to take the shuttle upstairs to the ship. General Kagiv—he wants to chew on me in person—the General has laid down the law. He wants the books closed on this one and out from under the Office's responsibility before this thing grows out of all proportion and gets thrown in front of the United Quadrants."

Shimsiv nodded. "I see, sir."

Major Smith leaned on the book with his left hand and poked Shimsiv in the lieutenant's chest with the extended forefinger of his right hand. "With Kagiv involved, that means that everyone in the chain of command will be involved, and tail-chewing as if their pensions depended on how deep they can bite. Understand?"

Shimsiv swallowed and nodded. "Yessir."

Major Smith stood up. "Good. Just remember that your own tail is the grand prize in this mastication contest."

Shimsiv closed his eyes as he felt himself becoming slightly dizzy. Yes, that tension cramp in his tail was definitely approaching reality. He opened his eyes. "Yessir. I understand, sir."

Smith nodded and walked to the open door of the whitewashed adobe building. He talked as he left the room. "I'll send the shuttle back as soon as I'm on board. When you find out something, get it to me fast."

The major was out through the door before Shimsiv could perform the courtesy of coming to attention. "Yessir," said the lieutenant to the empty doorway. Shimsiv scratched his head with the claws of his right hand as he flexed his tail to work out the cramp. He heard Smith's voice in the distance muttering something about wishing he'd never set foot in the damned place and so forth. Shimsiv was about to extend his uncommunicated sympathies to the major hav-

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ing to face General Kagiv. Nuumiians were mean little bastards by nature, but General Kagiv—bless his blue-hided four-fingered self—was the meanest pick of an above-average litter. But, as he recalled Major Smith's comment regarding just whose tail was closest to the grinder, Lieutenant Shimsiv reserved his sympathies for he who was most in need and resumed his task with restored vigor. He turned to the gaudily decorated page beginning the book's next section, and continued reading.

WORKING THE ROUTE BOOK

ONE

It was the beginning of the 2144 season (Earth Time) and O'Hara's Greater Shows' third season in the circus starship *City of Baraboo.* Never had Divver-Sehin Tho had a passing thought of being employed by humans, and a circus was beyond his experience. He was a reasonably-secure language clerk in the Bureau of Regret in Aargow, capital of the planet Pendiia. The Democratists had been in office less than three years, replacing a monarchy that had been in place for twelve centuries. Divver had fought in the revolution on the Democratists' side, but as the wheels of reform reduced the Bureau of Regret to a loosely supervised chaos, he found himself half wishing for the return of the monarchy.

It was in such a frame of mind, aided by a hysterical division supervisor who the day before had been attempting to maintain his pre-revolutionary position by creating endless work, that Divver found himself at odd moments reading the help-wanted ads in the news chips. It was not that he was thinking seriously about leaving his position; he simply wanted to assure himself that the choice was still his. It was on the first day of his vacation, and he was occupied with the want ads, when one listing caught his eye:

Call! Call! Call! Where are you Billy Pratt? Jowles McGee, stay where you are. State lowest salary in first letter. Need one to work the route book. Must read, write English, experience in history useful. Apply in person to O'Hara's Greater Shows, Westhoven.

Divver frowned. The human entertainment company had put down on Pendiia some months before, but he had never seen the

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show. Since he was familiar with the Earth tongue called English and had a smattering of history and an overwhelming curiosity, he decided to journey to the municipality of Westhoven and see what could be seen.

As he put up the rented scooter and came on the lot at Westhoven, the number of humans on the lot began making him nervous. Earth had supported the old monarchy in the revolution until the Ninth Quadrant forces intervened to let the Pendiians settle their own politics.

In the center of the lot was spread a huge canvas structure supported by poles and tied down by endless lengths of rope. Human painters were touching up the red paint and gold leaf on numerous wagons with brightly colored, spoked wheels. Performers practiced between several smaller canvas structures—a juggler, a woman who appeared to be tying herself into a knot, a few tumblers—when a human mountain clad in rough workalls and a sloped-front hat stood up from untangling some rope and turned in Divver's direction. "Help you?"

"Why, yes." Divver looked at the note he had made from the news chip. "Where do I apply for a position?"

The big man's eyebrows went up, then he shifted the stub of a cigar fron one side of his mouth to the other. Lowering his brows again, he pointed with his thumb over his shoulder. "Back in the treasury wagon."

Divver looked in the indicated direction and saw a forest of brightly painted wagons. "Which would be the treasury wagon?"

The big man rubbed his chin, squinted, raised one eyebrow, then poked the Pendiian in the ribs with a finger shaped much like a knockwurst. "You wouldn't be that shakedown artist with the sweet tooth, would you?"

Divver backed away, rubbing his ribs. "I'm certain I have no idea to what you are referring!"

The big man rubbed his chin some more, then nodded. "You speak that stuff pretty good." He held out a hand the size of a soup plate. "I'm called Duckfoot. Boss Canvasman."

Divver had seen the curious human ritual before. He lifted his arm and placed his hand against the human's. In a moment, the Pendiian's hand disappeared as it underwent a friendly mangle. "My name is . . . ah! . . . . . Divver-Sehin Tho."

Duckfoot nodded as the Pendiian counted, then flexed, his fingers. "Divver-Sayheen . . . well, that won't last long. Are you going to work the route book?"

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"I'm looking into the position."

Duckfoot cocked his head back toward the wagons. "Come on, I'll take you to see the Governor." The pair crossed the lot until they stood before a white and gold wagon with a caged window set into the side. Duckfoot mounted the stairs leading to the door and opened it. "Mr. John. First of May out here."

The door opened all of the way exposing a rotund, but very tall, human dressed in loud-checked coat and trousers. He was hairless on top, but sported white, well-trimmed facial hair. He looked down at Divver, then motioned with his hand toward the interior of the wagon. "Come in and find a spot to squat. Be with you in a minute." He turned and went into the wagon.

Divver nodded at the Boss Canvasman as the large man came down the stairs. "Thank you." Duckfoot waved a hand and moved off toward his pile of rope. Divver swallowed, walked up the stairs and entered the wagon. Four desks crammed the interior along with cabinets and tape files. Every portion of wall space not taken up with furniture, bulletins, or windows was hung with brightly colored paintings of fierce animals, strangely painted humans, and a white and gold spaceship decorated with strange patterns. In the rear of the wagon, the white-bearded man was seated in a comfortable chair facing a tall, thin human dressed in a black suit. Divver found a chair and sat down.

The bearded human nodded at the thin one. "Go ahead, Patch."

"Well, Mr. John, I appreciate the offer, but I'm getting a little old for the road. On the *Baraboo* between planets isn't bad, but trouping on the surface is wearing me down."

Mr. John shook his head. "Hate to lose you. You're the best fixer in the business."

"Was, Mr. John, was." The thin man shook his head. "I hate to go off and leave you with Arnheim & Boon on the warpath, but retirement is the only thing left in the cards for me."

"Are you certain everything is worked out?"

The Patch nodded. "Easiest fix I ever put in." He shrugged and held out his hands. "These guys are real punks."

Mr. John clasped his hands over his belly and smiled. "Sure you won't miss the show?"

"I'll miss it, but I think the work will be interesting. It's no circus, but there's plenty need for a fixer."

O'Hara stood and held out his hand. "Good luck, and send a note along when you can."

The thin man shook Mr. John's hand, then he turned and left the

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wagon. Divver stood up and approached the bearded man's desk. "My name is Divver-Sehin Tho. I've come about the advertisement."

The Governor looked off into the distance for a moment, then turned his eyes in Divver's direction. His eyes were bright blue under shaggy, white brows. "Divver-Sehin Tho. Well, that won't last long. Know English, do you?"

"Yes . . . " The Pendiian looked toward the door, then back at the Governor. "If you don't mind my asking, just what is a fixer?"

"Legal adjuster. Keeps us out from under permits, coppers, local politicos. I don't know if I'll ever be able to replace him." He leaned forward and stroked his short-cropped white beard. "Know anything about the law, how to spread sugar where it does the most good?"

The Pendiian shrugged. "Not a thing. I came about the advertisement. You wanted someone who could read, write, and speak English. This is my function in the Bureau of Regret."

"Hmmm." The Governor leaned back in his chair. "What's your name again?"

"Divver-Sehin Tho."

"Ummm." The Governor stroked his beard again. "See here, Divver, what I had in mind was a . . . man. A human."

"That seems pretty narrow-minded. A goodly number of the creatures I saw out there on the lot hardly look human!"

O'Hara laughed, then nodded. "We do come in a variety of sizes and shapes."

"I had particular reference to the one with two heads."

"Oh, Na-Na is with the kid show. All the same, she's human." The Governor leaned forward. "What I need is someone to keep the route book for the show. O'Hara's Greater Shows was the first circus to take to the star road. Now, even though that was only two years ago, there must be thirty companies flying around right now calling themselves circuses. Most of them come from non-Earth planets, but even the ones from Earth are nothing but flying gadget shows." The Governor stabbed a finger in Divver's direction. "I don't ever want *this* company to forget what a real circus is."

Divver held out his hands. "What has this to do with your route book?"

The Governor leaned back in his chair, spread open his coat, and stuck his thumbs behind thick, yellow suspenders. "Now, Spivvy, a route book is a show's log of the season. It works just like a ship's log. It has daily entries that tell where we are, what's happening, and what kind of shape we're in." O'Hara pulled one of his thumbs out from under a suspender and used the forefinger on the same

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hand to point at Divver. "But, I want more out of my route-book man . . . or creature. I want to keep the book just like a running history. I need someone to write the history that this show will make. How does that sound?"

Divver rubbed his bumpy chin. "I'm curious to know what happened to the former occupant of this position?"

"Killed. In a clem on Masstone at the end of last season." O'Hara frowned. "I've been keeping it since, but I'm not doing the job the way I want." He studied the Pendiian, then nodded. "You Pendiians have good eyesight I hear."

Divver frowned, lowered his voice, and leaned forward. "I must tell you that I have grave doubts about this position."

"What kind of doubts?"

"Among others, I fought against humans during the Revolution. Would I be placed in a position where I might be subjected to hostility?"

The Governor laughed and shook his head. "No. Place your mind at rest, Skivver. The purpose of a show is to entertain, not be political. See, we have to appeal to everyone, and so we stay out of politics." O'Hara snapped his yellow suspenders. "That's one principle that's set in concrete." He grabbed a coat lapel with each hand and looked through his shaggy brows at the ceiling. "An alien working the route book—" He nodded. "—that just might be the ticket." The Governor looked at Divver. "You'd be putting down the kind of detail a trouper would take for granted, and that's just the kind of stuff I don't want to lose—"

The door opened and the Boss Canvasman stuck in his head. "Mr. John, my gang is back from the polls. I'm putting them on the spool wagons for the rest of the day."

"All the repairs on the old rag completed? I don't want anything to hold up tomorrow's opening."

"All done. Is the road clear yet?"

O'Hara shook his head. "Seen that fellow with the sweet tooth on the lot?"

"Yeah. He's been rubbering around the lot for the past few minutes." Duckfoot turned his head and looked over his shoulder. "Here he comes now." The Boss Canvasman stood in the doorway until a voice spoke up with a thick Pendiian accent.

"I am here to see the owner."

Duckfoot stepped aside and held out a hand in O'Hara's direction. "There is himself." Duckfoot left laughing, as the Pendiian climbed the steps and walked inside.

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The Pendiian looked at Divver, frowned, then performed the shallow quarter-bow indicating the greeting of a superior to an inferior. Divver barely cocked his head in return. The newcomer studied Divver a moment longer. "I am Mizan-Nie Crav, code enforcement officer for the Municipality of Westhoven."

"Divver-Sehin Tho."

Crav turned to O'Hara, then looked back at Divver. "Might I ask why you are here?"

"You might." Divver's steam was up. A haze over the subject of sugar and Crav's sweet tooth began lifting. Crav was holding up the show's permits until credits exchanged hands. Divver suspected that Crav was wondering whether the Pendiian in O'Hara's wagon was an investigator.

"Then, why are you here?"

"It is none of your concern."

O'Hara chuckled. "Now, now, Skivvy, that's no way to talk to a high municipal official." The Governor turned and faced Crav. "Skivvy here is applying for a job. What's on your mind, Crab?"

"That's *Crav,* Mister O'Hara." The officer folded his arms and looked down his lumpy nose at the Governor. "I see by the posters and banners stuck and hung all over the town that you intend to conduct your parade and opening show as scheduled."

O'Hara nodded. "True. Very observant." The Governor turned to Divver. "I always said you Pendiians have sharp eyes." He looked back at Crav.

"Mister O'Hara, I thought we had an understanding."

O'Hara held out his hands and shrugged. "What can I do, Crav? Those tackspitters and bannermen are just plain thick. I've explained bribes, crooks, and such to them time and again; but they just don't seem to get it."

Crav squinted. "As I said before, O'Hara: There will be no parade and no show unless . . . certain conditions are met." The officer turned, marched to the door, then faced the Governor. "Set one foot on a Westhoven street or let one customer into your tent, and I'll arrest the lot of you!"

As Crav left, O'Hara chuckled and turned toward Divver. "Now, where were we?"

Divver turned his head from the door, frowning. "That creature! He is demanding money! He should be reported to the Bureau of Regret—"

The Governor held up his hands. "Hold your horses. Crav is being handled. We were saying . . . ?"

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Divver shrugged. "You were explaining the nonpolitical nature of the circus when the Duckfoot fellow interrupted to inform you that his crew had just returned from the polls. Are humans voting in the municipal election?"

O'Hara raised his brows and pursed his lips. "They've been here long enough to establish residency. Shouldn't they?"

"What you said about the show being nonpolitical—"

"Oh, *that.* Well, I can't stop my people from voting, can I?" O'Hara shrugged. "Besides, all three of Westhoven's candidates were out here offering handsome prices for troupers' votes."

Divver stood. "*Buying* votes! That's . . . . disgraceful! To suffer a revolution to—"

O'Hara held up his hands. "Calm down, Skivvy. Calm down. It's nothing to get upset over." Divver resumed his seat. "If you troup with this show, you'll see worse things out of politicos than that."

Divver folded his arms and snorted. "Do you know whose credits will buy the election?"

"Why, let's see. Each candidate promised five credits for showing up and voting. That's fifteen, and an easier fifteen is hard to come by. So they pick up their fifteen, then take advantage of the secret ballot."

Divver stood again, clasped his hands behind his back, and began pacing before the Governor's desk. "An outrage, that's what it is. The revolution less than three years old, and corruption run rampant! Bribes, vote buying . . . " He stopped and faced O'Hara. "I *must* report this! All of this—"

The Governor shook his head. "No. We take care of shakedown artists in our own way. We never call copper." O'Hara shrugged. "Besides it would take forever to square things away through the coppers; it's faster to let Patch handle it."

Divver sat down. "What can he do? I don't see—"

"It's like when we put into orbit around Masstone last season. Now, our nut's pretty heavy, and—"

"Nut?"

O'Hara shook his head and raised his brows. "My, but aren't you a First of May? The nut is our daily cost of operation. See, what with paying off the *Baraboo*—that's our ship—fuel for the shuttles, wages, supplies, permit fees, taxes, maintenance, property, and so on, it figures out to forty-nine thousand credits a day. That's our nut."

"I see."

"Well, once we put into orbit and put down the show planetside,

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you can see why we have to start playing to two straw houses right off."

"Full houses?"

"That's what I said. Anyway, once we put down on Masstone, the shakedown artists dropped on us and wouldn't let us open unless we spread the sugar." O'Hara leaned forward and pointed a thick finger. "Now, I can see helping an underpaid civil servant make ends meet now and again; but shakedowns are a different matter. We don't give in to 'em. It's the principle of the thing."

Divver decided that the Governor was a man of principles. "What did you do?"

"Patch caught up with our advertising shuttle and had the lithographers make up some new paper." O'Hara pulled his beard, shook his head and chuckled. "See, we'd been advertising the show on Masstone for weeks, and the gillies were looking forward to seeing us. Patch sent out the brigade loaded with hods of posters all over the big towns and had the mediagents work the papers and stations with readers—press releases. Well, all they said was that there would be no show because of permit difficulties." The Governor slapped his knee. "In the space of a week, Masstone almost had a revolution on its hands and the authorities were begging us to put on the show, and no charges for the permits. Well, we sat back and thought about it, know what I mean?"

"I'm not sure. You didn't take the permits?"

O'Hara nodded. "We took 'em, after they paid us two hundred thousand credits to take 'em."

"You mean . . ."

"We shook *them* down."

The Governor studied the Pendiian, waiting for his reaction. All Divver could do was nod. "I see why you will miss Mister Patch."

O'Hara nodded. "Oh, I could tell you a thousand stories about Patch. I have the call out for another fixer—Billy Pratt—but I don't know if I can get him."

The wagon door opened, and in walked a dapper fellow dressed in a red coat with black collar, black trousers tucked into shiny black boots. "Governor, I've brought the rest of the performers back from the polls. Are you finished with the parade order?"

O'Hara pushed some papers around on his desk, then pulled one out and handed it to the man, then turned toward Divver. "This is Sarasota Sam, the Circus Equestrian Director. Sam, meet Skivvy-Seein Toe."

He stood and let Sarasota Sam crush his fingers. "My name is

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Divver-Sehin Tho."

Sam smiled. "Well, that won't last long."

"Skivvy's taking the route book."

"I'm considering it."

Sam held up the paper and turned toward O'Hara. "I'd better get together with the property man about this."

O'Hara nodded and Sam left the wagon. Divver faced the Governor. "If I did take the position, what would I be paid?"

"Eighty a week—that's seven Earth days—bed and board. Holdback is ten a week and you get it at the end of the season if you can cut it."

By the time the Pendiian had returned to his living unit, had put in a night's sleep, and had thought about it, the entire prospect of wandering around the Quadrant like a nomad with a collection of peculiar beings seemed foolish. This feeling was underlined by the pay, which was half of his take at the Bureau. Divver could imagine himself in the Patch's position—old, worn out, and cast adrift on a strange planet when he couldn't "cut it" anymore. In addition, it appeared that the "English" the Governor wanted hadn't been covered in Divver's education.

Despite the meaninglessness of his position at the Bureau and the tarnish gathering on the glory of the revolution, Divver had made up his mind to expect less from life and return to the Bureau at the end of his vacation. He chanced then, to read his morning news chips. When the Pendiian had stopped laughing and had recovered enough to rise from his prone position on the floor, he had made up his mind to take the route book. Divver-Sehin Tho would follow the red wagons on their route to strange, unpredicatble worlds.

The news story was a simple account of the Westhoven municipal election. The three candidates on the ballot had been defeated by a surprise write-in campaign. The picture next to the story showed the aging winner dressed in black coat and trousers, his large watery eyes looking back at the reader. The circus would get its permit; Westhoven would get its parade; and the fixer, Patch, had found something to occupy his retirement years—being mayor of Westhoven. As the Patch had said, it isn't the circus but there's plenty need for a fixer.

TWO

At the conclusion of his third night with O'Hara's Greater Shows,

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Divver-Sehin Tho pulled himself into the office wagon while it was being loaded on the shuttle to be moved to the next stand. He sat at his desk, located across the aisle from the treasurer's workplace, heaved a tired sigh, then lifted his pen and began his work.

Route Book, O'Hara's Greater Shows
2 May 2144.

The Governor insists that the route book use Earth time designations, which means having to ask the date, since no one has provided me with a date table. I asked why Earth time, when every other institution in the Quadrant uses Galactic Standard. He says that if we don't use Earth time, we won't know when to layup at the off season. I offered to keep track in Galactic, but he thinks calling a "First of May"—a first season trouper—a 12-point-04 shreds the designation of meaning and romance.

It distresses me to see myself falling so easily into the lingo—circus talk. Climbing ropes are "tapes," the lot entrance is the "Front Door," or "8th Avenue Side"; performers are "kinkers" or "spangle pratts." Perhaps the last refers to the location of costume sequins—perhaps not.

Much of the language appears designed to bunk the customers, while at the same time maintaining a peculiar brand of integrity among the circus people. To the patrons (rubes, gillies, guys, towners) Zelda's establishment is "Madam Zelda, Fortune Teller extraordinary, palm reader and medium, will probe the past and the future using the vast array of Dark Powers at her command." To the show people, it's called a "mitt joint." The "Emporium of Pink Lemonade" is the "juice joint"; and after witnessing the beverage's manufacture, I have sworn to shrivel up and blow away in the heat before letting a drop pass my lips. Nonetheless, the gillies imbibe it by the vat. Weasel, the fellow who has the juice joint privilege, explained that the slices of lemon on top of the evil brew are called "floaters"; and he boasted that his property lemon would last through the entire season.

Thus far we have been keeping up with our paper (we're on schedule) and we've had one blow-down (wind storm) and two clems (fights with towners). The horse piano (calliope, pronounced CA-LY-O-PEE by all English speaking peoples, but CAL-EE-OPE by show people) has been repaired, and our ears are once again assaulted by the horrible strains of Doctor Weems' steam music. The Governor wants everything in perfect order when we put in to Vistunya after our Wallabee tour. Thus spake John J. O'Hara:

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"You have to understand, Warts (my new name), the circus has to appeal to all sexes, all ages, all races, all brands of religion, morality, and politics. Those folks on Vistunya are upset about dirt—they think it's perverse, dirty, depraved. We could run the entire company around the hippodrome stark naked; and as long as they were clean, no one would be offended. But dirt? Never. We have to keep those things in mind when we're picking our route."

"Do you pick the route?"

"No. Rat Man Jack Savage is our route man. He's about a year ahead of us. He keeps in touch through the general agent and he tells us what to watch out for as far as local taboos. So, remember: if the gillies consider it politics, smut, racism, or religion, we don't do it. It's the principle of the thing. That's how we're keeping the traditions of the old circus alive, Warts: principles."

"Governor, it seems to me that my people back on Pendiia would consider Patch's fix in Westhoven to be politics. What about that?"

O'Hara raised one white eyebrow at me, pursed his lips, shrugged and held out his hands. "Well, Warts . . . you gotta be flexible."

Circus names, although terribly uncomplimentary, never are occasions for offense. The names derive from a physical peculiarity, former association, or incident. My own name of Warts is due to the usual bumps found on a Pendiian. Duckfoot Tarzak has a distinctive walk; while Quack Quack, the mediagent, has a distinctive voice. Goofy Joe's name was attached for obscure reasons, since I found the canvasman to be at least as intelligent as the show's run of roughnecks. In any event, it was Goofy Joe who related the tale of how Stretch got his name.

Goofy Joe Tells His Tale

I couldn't say this if we was back with the main top. This is one story that Duckfoot doesn't go out of his way to hear. First, there's something you have to know about the Boss Canvasman. Duckfoot Tarzak's people come from Poland. That's why the center poles on the big top have those funny names: Paddyowski, Wassakooski, and such. When we have the bulls hooked to the block and tackles pulling the baling rings up those sixty-foot sticks, Duckfoot calls out "Go ahead on Paddyowski . . . hold Paddy . . . go ahead on Wassakooski . . . hold Kooski . . . " until all six rings are peaked, raising the old rag. But, see, you have to be on the lot awhile to learn those names; and Stretch didn't know them.

I guess it was our third or fourth stand on Occham, and there was cherry pie all around. The reason we were shorthanded was a blown-

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down that splintered two of the center poles on the main top and busted up a few of the sports on the guying-out gang. Duckfoot was taking on some new roughnecks, and Stretch was one of the ones he hired. If you look at Stretch, you know why the Boss Canvasman took him on. Big, strapping, good-looking fellow, and as green a First of May as you ever saw.

Stretch—or Ansel as he was called then—he was put in Fatty Bugg's crew: and even though Fatty was a bit in his cups, everything was going fine. The poles were up, the canvas spread and laced, and side poles were up. Fatty took Ansel, a bull, and an elephant man under and hooked onto Cho-pan, that's the number-three pole. With a crew on each stick, Duckfoot hollers out, "Go ahead on Paddyowski," and the bull on number-one stick pulls up the baling ring fifteen feet. "Hold Paddy . . . go ahead on Wassakooski . . . hold Kooski." About then, Fatty Bugg slapped Ansel on the shoulder and told him to take over. Then Fatty stumbles away from the stick a few feet and goes to sleep.

"Go ahead on Cho-pan!" calls Duckfoot, but nothing happens. "Cho-pan, go ahead," he calls again, but nothing happens. Duckfoot sticks his head under the edge and in the dark sees the bull hooked to the number three stick. He points at it and yells "Wake up, and go ahead!" Ansel gives the elephant man the high sign, and the bull moves out. Up goes the baling ring about fifteen feet, and Duckfoot calls out "Hold Cho-pan!" But the ring keeps going up, and he calls out again "Hold Cho-pan!"

Well, the ring is about thirty feet up Cho-pan, and Duckfoot runs under the rag and tells Ansel's elephant man to hold up, then he turns to Ansel. "You deaf? I called hold on this stick! Where's Fatty?"

"There." Ansel pointed.

Duckfoot stomps over, kicks Fatty in the leg. "Hit the treasury wagon, Fatty, and collect your pay." Then he goes to the sidepoles and calls for Blue Pete to take over Ansel's bull. "What about me?" asks Ansel and Duckfoot turns and rubs his chin as he studied the boy.

"The quarter poles go up next and we have the wrong size. You go find the Boss Hostler and get the pole stretcher." Ansel runs off. Duckfoot shakes his head, then goes back to calling up the rings.

Well, the Boss Hostler sent Ansel to the Boss Porter, who sent him to the loading runs, where one of the razorbacks sent him off to the property man. Just about then, I guess, Ansel realized that the only thing that was getting stretched was his leg.

Well, Duckfoot had about half the quarter poles up when Ansel

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drives up in a cat pulling a flatbed wagon. On the wagon is this huge crate, and lettered on its side it says "Little Eureka Pole Stretcher." Duckfoot comes up as Ansel's getting down from the cat and points at the crate.

"Here's the pole stretcher, Duckfoot. Had a devil of a time finding it."

Duckfoot frowns, then walks up to the crate. Just then howls and screams come from inside and the whole thing starts to rock and shake. Out of the top of the crate comes this huge, black, hairy hand, each finger tipped with a knife-sized claw. It grabs around a bit, then goes back inside. Duckfoot turns to Ansel and says "What's that?"

"That's your pole stretcher, Duckfoot. Go ahead and open it up and you'll see a pole get stretched good and proper."

Well, Duckfoot taps his foot on the lot, folds his arms and glowers at the kid for awhile, then he nods. "Good job, but . . . seems like all the poles around here are just the size I want them. Take it back."

Ansel hops back on the cat, and off he goes. Ever since then, he's been called Stretch. Go over to the Boss Animal Man sometime and ask him to show you a picture of that four-ton clawbeast the show picked up on Hessif's Planet. The thing was too vicious and had to be destroyed, but while it was in the menagerie, its name was "Little Eureka." No one ever did figure out how Stretch got it in that crate.

2 May 2144.

Tonight we tore down the show at Vortnagg on Pendiia, loaded and made ship for the next stand, which will be the fourth planet in the Gurav system, called Wallabee. The Governor had me leave with the last shuttle to permit my observation of the tear-down process. I confess I was not quick enough on my toes to see the entire operation. I felt safe in thinking that I would be able to enjoy the finish of the performance, but that was not to be. Before half the customers were out of the main top—being hustled through the entrance by impatient ushers—the elephants and the roughnecks began piling through the performer's entrance.

I was hustled out with the rest and was stunned to see the animal top—containing the menagerie—the cookhouse, dressing top, side-show, all gone. By the time I made it back into the main top, the customers were gone and three hundred canvasmen, propmen, ring makers, side-wall men, electricians, and rigging men were stripping the inside. The folding plank platforms that serve as seats were

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being hydraulically collapsed into the backs of waiting vans, while the performers' rigging and stages were being detached, pulled apart, and digested by more wagons. Lights began going off as the electricians removed the heavy light arrays. Meanwhile the elephants—bulls—were being directed to unseat the quarter poles supporting the middle of the top between the peak and the side-walls. Before they were finished, it was black inside, and I moved out fast, having no desire to be trampled underfoot.

I stood to one side of the former main entrance, after the last of the wagons and bulls had exited, and heard the Boss Canvasman say "Let 'er go!" A blast of air mixed with all of the smells of the circus rushed from under the tent, almost carrying the six men who ran from beneath the collapsing fabric. Even before the huge sea of canvas had settled to the lot, canvasmen jumped on it and began unlacing the sections. In moments, the huge sections were folded, rolled, and stored upon the spool wagons. The six sticks—center poles—of the main top were lowered, while countless stakes were pulled up by a tractor and loaded into more wagons.

It seemed that a city had vanished; and as I stood in the empty lot watching scraps of paper being pushed by the gentle breeze, I felt a hand on my shoulder. I turned and saw a rugged, black face. "I bet that's the first time for you, isn't it?"

I nodded. "I've never seen anything like it—"

He held up a hand, then pointed it at the departing wagons. "You better get going. Those wagons will be loaded and the shuttles gone in another twenty minutes."

"Aren't you coming?"

He shook his head. "I'm Tick Tock, the twenty-four hour man. I have to stay behind to clean up the lot and make sure the city is happy with the way we leave the place."

I looked at the wagons. "But how will you get to the ship?"

"I don't. I jump ahead of the ship to prepare the next lot. Been with Mr. John nine years, now; and I've never seen the show." He pointed again at the wagons, and I ran. I made the Number Ten shuttle just as the sixty-foot center pole wagon was being pulled inside.

I had no time to gawk at the *City of Baraboo*. No sooner had the shuttle docked and made fast to the exterior of the hull than I was hustled off and directed to report to Mr. John's quarters. I was carried by the stream of traffic, and by chance managed to make it. The door was open, and I entered. My entrance was acknowledged

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by the Governor raising one eyebrow, giving me a quick glance, then returning his gaze to the papers on his desk. Two men were in the compartment, standing next to the desk; and when Duckfoot and another man pushed in behind me, the six of us appeared to crowd the tiny room.

The Governor sat up and nodded at Duckfoot. "Close the door. Fill the Boss Hostler and Boss Porter in after we talk." Duckfoot turned, pressed a switch, and faced O'Hara as the door hissed shut.

"What's up, Mr. John?"

The Governor looked at me. "Warts, this is Rat Man Jack, our route man, and Stretch Dirak. Stretch manages the advance car." He indicated the two men standing next to his desk. "You know Duckfoot; the fellow who came in with him is Bald Willy, pilot and Boss Crewman of the *Baraboo*." He pointed at me. "This is Warts." I nodded at the others. The Governor nodded at Rat Man. "Tell them."

Rat Man Jack faced the rest of us. "Two things: there's a civil war brewing on Wallabee and the Abe Show is going to try running day-and-date with us there to try and split the circus crowd."

Duckfoot issued a low whistle, then shook his head. "Rat Man, is there any chance that the civil war will begin shooting while we're on the skin?"

Rat Man shrugged. "No one can be certain, but things are pretty tense." He turned to O'Hara. "What about the Abe Show? If Arnheim & Boon knew about the political situation, maybe they'd call off the duel to another time."

The Governor smiled and closed his eyes. "They know." His eyes opened again. "They get their information from the same places that we get ours. I think that Arnheim knew first about the possible rebellion, and then decided that it might be to his advantage in his war with us."

The Rat Man held out his hands. "Well, do we blow the planet and find greener grass, or do we slug it out?"

The Governor bowed his head for an instant, then came up with fire in his eye. "We play Wallabee, as scheduled. The route, contracts, advertising—everything—is already done. We'd have to delay for a month or more to alter the route now, and that would give Karl Arnheim just what he wants, *and* without bruising one knuckle." He turned to the Boss Canvasman. "Duckfoot, can you peel off a couple of dozen of your roughnecks and give them to Stretch? I want to beef up the advance's opposition brigade."

Duckfoot nodded. "There'll be cherry pie all around, but we can

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handle it."

"Good." Mr. John faced me. "Warts, I want you to go with the advance."

"Me?"

"Yes, you. A good bit of the action will be on the advertising car, and I want you to get it all down. I'll take notes on the show so you won't fall behind." He turned to Bald Willy. "The *City of Baraboo* has to be protected at all costs. I don't put it past Arnheim to try and pull something on board."

Bald Willy nodded. "Don't worry, Mr. John. No one knows this tub better than I do."

The Governor nodded, then raised his eyebrows. "And, don't *you* forget that this ship was built by Arnheim & Boon Conglomerated Enterprises." He turned back to his papers. "That's it."

As we left the compartment, the one called Stretch, a huge, powerful looking man, grabbed my arm and began pulling me along in his wake. "Wait, I have to pick up my things!"

"No time, Warts. No time. In the advance that's all you have time for: no time."

THREE

The advance is the advertising arm of the show. It is housed, between planets, in a quad-shuttle commando raider named the *Blitzkrieg*. The shuttles are named *Cannon Ball, Thunderbird, Battle Bolt,* and *War Eagle,* I am told, after the advertising cars used by the now-extinct RB&BB Show. The belligerence of the names might lead one to conclude that the advance's role is of a combative nature. In such a case, one would be right.

Before the *City of Baraboo* had left orbit, the *Blitz*'s last shuttle, *War Eagle,* was up from the surface of Pendiia with Tick Tock, the twenty-four hour man. No sooner had Number Four docked, than the *Blitz* streaked out ahead of the *Baraboo* toward Wallabee. What happened next might be called an executive meeting or strategy session in an advertising firm, but on the *Blitz* we gathered for a Council of War.

In the tiny wardroom, there was Stretch Dirak; the four "car" managers; Fisty Bill Ris, the boss of the opposition brigade; and myself. Stretch greeted everyone, and sat down behind the wardroom table. We all took our seats around the table, then Stretch began. "The Abe Show intends to pull day-and-date with us on Wallabee, so you all know what that means for us. There'll be over-

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billing of our paper, opposition; and depending on how far ahead of us their advance is, the squarers might have difficulty in securing poster space, banner permits—"

Cross-eyes Oscar, manager of the *Cannon Ball,* held up a hand, then dropped it on the table. "Stretch, are we going to run the order the way we did on Masstone?"

"For you it'll be the same. I hate to leave you naked, Cross-eyes, but I figure the Abe Show opposition to hit the last three cars. That's where the paper is." He turned to Fisty Bill. "Fisty, I want twenty roughnecks in *Thunderbird,* twenty in *Battle Bolt,* and the remaining sixty in *War Eagle.*"

The manager of the *Thunderbird* shook his head. "Stretch, you know they're going to be waiting for us, and when we start putting up our paper—or over-billing theirs—we're going to get opposition. Twenty isn't going to be enough. With my crew and billposters, tack-spitters, that leaves me with less than eighty men."

Stretch nodded. "I'm going to use *War Eagle* as a flying attack and reserve brigade." He turned to Six Chins Ivan, manager of the *War Eagle.* "In addition to the brigade, you'll still handle the checkers up and the twenty-four-hour man; but most of the time you'll be in the air looking for trouble. If you don't find it, start it." He looked around the table. "I'll be moving between all four cars, and remember to keep the radio net complete at all times. The Governor wants clean victory with each opposition, and I don't ever want the Abe Show to forget that they tangled with us."

Later, Stretch and I worked the *Blitz*'s research files on Wallabee. Unfortunately, they were pretty skimpy, it being a new stand for the show. The Nithads, the dominant race on the planet, are stooped-over, vaguely egg-shaped. Their backs are armored with a thick, segmented shell; but they do have bipedal locomotion. Their arms and hands extend from under the shell. There are two arms per Nithad, and two opposing fingers per hand.

Since Wallabee is the nearest habitable planet to Pendiia, the history of the planet had been touched on during my education; and I had been following several trends in the interplanetery section of the news chips. The race had a written history over twenty thousand of their years long; and during that period, no wars, revolutions, or even riots had been recorded, leading to such expressions as "having the heart of a Nithad" to denote a peaceful, nonviolent person, and "having the courage of a Nithad" to denote a coward.

Nevertheless, the ruling class of the Nithads had followed a pat-

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tern as old as life itself: thought itself threatened, then proceeded to eliminate the opposition by a variety of oppressive measures, including the confinement of political prisoners, elimination of local elections (even though the ruling class had the only qualified candidates), and the total elimination of communications freedom. Following the pattern, the ruling class was outnumbered, and the Wallabee Liberation Front grew into a powerful force almost overnight. Organized rebellion so far had only involved boycotts of ruling-class merchants and compulsory ceremonies, but it had been reported to the Ninth Quadrant Commission on Interplanetary Political Stability (9QCIPS) that the rebels had obtained a quantity of weapons from the Nuumiian Empire. Open hostilities were considered only a matter of time. It was in this atmosphere that O'Hara's Greater Shows and the Abe Show planned to wage their own war.

FOUR

7 May 2144.

The *Blitzkrieg* makes orbit around Wallabee. Stretch assigns me to the Number Two car, the *Thunderbird,* managed by Razor Red Stampo. The *Thunderbird* follows the *Cannon Ball* by four days. This enables the mediagents (press agents) and squarers to prepare the way. *Cannon Ball* makes certain readers are issued to the mass media, and that permission for space to put up paper and banners is obtained. Cross-eyes Oscar reports back to the *Blitz* that, although the Abe Show already has paper up, there has been no trouble in obtaining permission for our own displays. Stretch decided to go down to the first stand with the *Thunderbird.*

11 May 2144.

Garatha, on Wallabee. When the *Thunderbird* arrived this morning, we found the city papered with the Abe Show's bills. Razor loads down the billposters with hods of newly printed paper and sends them out to cover the enemy paper. Stretch has been walking through the city and has come back with a puzzled expression on his face.

"The Abe Show's paper is the only advertising I've seen in Garatha. The enemy's hits on buildings is impressive but I don't see where the Nithads advertise. Have to think on it."

Opposition in Garatha. The billposters covering up Abe Show

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paper on Viula Street have called in for help. A force of ten Abe Show roughnecks has cornered three of our men. Stretch and Razor mount up the twenty-man opposition brigade on cycles and head for the spot. By the time we arrive, half our paper has been re-covered. Razor sends out the brigade, and it wades into the Abe Show's opposition. Duckfoot's toothpicks, the four-foot tent stakes, make short work of the Abe Show toughs; and they retire.

While Razor re-covers the Abe Show paper, Stretch watches the Nithads that had gathered to watch the fight. None of them are looking at either the Abe-Show paper or ours. Instead, after watching the fight, they leaned forward and wandered off. Stretch examined the buildings around us, looked back at the few Nithad that remained, then hopped on a cycle and sped off toward the *Thunderbird*. When I arrived an hour later, Stretch was deep in conversation with the *Thunderbird*'s lithographer. They were bending over a layout of a poster, and when I peeked around Stretch's arm, I saw that it was our usual poster, except all the type was reversed. Instead of reading the posters from the top down, they had to be read from the bottom up. I could tell that, even though the posters were printed in the Nithad language.

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In two hours we had the new posters, and Stretch called in the billposters, and issued new paper and instructions. We were not to cover the Abe Show's paper on the buildings. Let them have the vertical surfaces, he told them. *Our* posters were to be pasted onto the sidewalks. The Nithad habitually looks down because of his armored back and stooped over position. Hence, the place they will see the most is the sidewalk. The billposters gathered up their hods of paper and vanished into the city. I, myself, saw an elderly Nithad come to a poster, examine it carefully as he traversed its surface, then rush on to the next poster, all the time ignoring the Abe-Show paper covering the wall of the building to the fellow's left.

15 May 2144.

The Governor has reported back to us that opening night was a sellout, while the Abe Show performed at barely a quarter of its capacity. Almost at the same moment, the Abe Show opposition began contesting our domination of the sidewalks. The *War Eagle* kept busy. There was hardly a town, large or small, that did not see a battle between opposition brigades. Paper covered paper, then was itself re-covered, then over-billed again. Gangs of stake-swinging roughnecks prowled the cities being billed, and it was a rare stand that did not leave half a dozen or more men laid up in the local hospital with mashed faces, broken limbs, or cracked skulls.

19 May 2144.

We have gotten word that the Quadrant Commission (9QCIPS) has warned both O'Hara and the Abe Show to knock off the war. The Commission fears that our performances will trigger an uprising on Wallabee. Since the layers of posters on some of the sidewalks were thick enough to impede traffic, the Commission's warning appeared to have little effect. At Stutladop, for reasons unknown, the Abe Show offered no opposition, but jumped ahead to the next stand.

FIVE

24 May 2144.

I was with the *Battle Bolt,* the Number Three car, covering over the paper the Abe Show had over-billed which was put down by the *Thunderbird.* The news from the grapevine was encouraging. The Abe Show was finding day-and-date with the Old One (that's what we called O'Hara's Show) an economic disaster. The Nithads may

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have been oppressed and preoccupied with their plans for revolution, but they could still tell the difference between a real circus and a traveling gadget-show.

When the *Battle Bolt*'s crew reached Hymnicon, we found our paper on the sidewalks untouched, and assumed that the Abe Show had either given up or had jumped ahead as before. Both turned out to be in error.

At night, midway through the show, the *Battle Bolt* got word that the Abe Show was sending their opposition brigade against the show itself. Of course we were fighting mad, since it ran against circus ethics to fight at the stand, unless the combatants happened to be towners. One show does not attack another show at the stand, because there is the possibility of customers getting hurt. Nevertheless, the word came in, and the *War Eagle* picked up our opposition brigade after picking up the brigade from the *Thunderbird*.

The full brigade streaked back toward the stand; and by the time we circled the area, we could see the Irish Brigade tangling with the Abe Show's opposition. In between and scattered all around were Nithads scurrying out of the show. We put down on the edge of the lot, grabbed our stakes, then piled out of the doors and joined the battle. We could see several of the Abe Show people heading for the main top and menagerie with torches. The canvas itself was inflammable; and between the seats in the main top and the straw in the animal top, there was reason enough to trample the Nithads that got in the way to get at the firebugs.

Opposition brigade ethics authorize only that amount of force necessary to make one's side victorious. Therefore, when the fists and stakes start swinging, there is a degree of restraint involved. Sending the opposition to the hospital is acceptable, whereas sending them to the morgue is not. At the battle of Garatha, there were no such restraints. Circus people do not sabotage one another, particularly if it might endanger the patrons. Since the Abe Show had thrown the rule book out of the window, we did the same.

Bodies dropped as blood-soaked stakes whipped through the night, landing upon skulls and breakable legs. The baggage horse top erupted in flame; and as the animal men led the Perches and rosinbacks out through the fire, the rest of us threw ourselves against the Abe Show's roughnecks. In seconds, performers, office workers—the Governor himself—were on the lot busting skulls. Here and there a Nithad would be caught by a backswing or kicked out of the way by someone anxious to get into the thick of the brawl. Eventually, all the egg-shaped creatures were huddled under their armor,

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looking like so many loaves of bread on the lot.

I had just finished thumping an obnoxious character when an Abe Show toothpick caught me between the eyes. When I woke up to the sound of my own bells, the opposition had retired and the Nithad patrons were coming out of their shells and scurrying off the lot. I saw the Governor being helped to his wagon by two canvasmen, and would have helped, except that I passed out again.

25 May 2144.

About to return to the advance, head bandaged nicely, when the grapevine reports that we've been kicked off the planet! The Abe Show has already left, but the Quadrant Commission insists that we are a poor influence on a people trying to avoid open rebellion. The show is torn down, loaded and sent upstairs to the *City of Baraboo.*

27 May 2144.

I was feeling pretty glum as I walked past the Governor's quarters. I heard laughter coming from within; and being in such a condition that I could stand a good laugh, I knocked on O'Hara's door.

"Come in! Come in!"

I pressed the door panel, it hissed open, I stepped in, and it hissed shut behind me. Stretch Dirak was seated across from the Governor at his desk, and both of them were drying their eyes. "What's so funny?"

The Governor handed me a flimsy upon which was printed a radio message. I read it and was instantly confused. The Nithad—both ruling class and liberation front—had called off the revolution and had vowed to resort to peaceful means in the resolution of the issues that divided them. It appeared that the Nithad's total lack of war for the proceeding twenty thousand years had not prepared them for the kind of conflict they had witnessed between the two shows. After that sight, both sides had decided that there *had* to be a better way, and immediate negotiations had begun. The flimsy was from the Ninth Quadrant Commission, and it concluded by calling the Abe Show and O'Hara's Greater Shows "Agents of reason and peace."

I looked at the Governor. "Does this mean that we'll be able to finish off our stands on Wallabee?"

"No." He laughed, then handed me another flimsy. "I went directly to the Wallabee Ruling Council and asked. This is their reply."

I took the sheet of paper and read it. It read in part: " . . . we must

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refuse. There is only so much of your 'peace and reason' that a planet such as ours can take."

THE SLICK GENTLEMEN

SIX

The secretary pushed open the door to the dark office. Entering, she closed the door behind her. In a moment the black mass before the sparkle of the city lights resolved into Karl Arnheim. "Mr. Arnheim?"

The black mass didn't move. The secretary stepped a little to one side and could see the lights from the streets below reflected in Karl Arnheim's unblinking eyes. "Mr. Arnheim?"

The eyes blinked, but remained fixed in their direction. "Yes, Janice?"

"Mr. Arnheim, I'm going home now. Do you want me to call for your car?"

"No."

Janice fidgeted uncomfortably in the dark for a moment, then put her hand on the door latch. "I've arranged for your annual physical for ten tomorrow—"

"Cancel it."

"But, Mr. Arnheim, this is the third year in—"

"I said cancel it." The mass turned. She could not see his face, but could feel his eyes burning into her. "Did you transfer those funds to Ahngar as I directed?"

"Yes, Mr. Arnheim. And I prepared those papers for the board meeting tomorrow. The proxies look pretty close. A lot of the stockholders are with Milton Stone about—"

"About what?" Silence hung heavy for a moment, then came the sound of a fist hitting a hardwood surface. "Stone, that two-bit accountant! What can he do, except sharpen his pencils? I'll run this corporation the way I always have, and if I choose to use every asset of this enterprise to drive John J. O'Hara into the dirt, I'll do it! What's more, no one can stop me!"

Janice clasped her hands in front of her, looking for an opening to bid her employer good night. "Sir, I—"

"Janice, by the end of this season, O'Hara will be ruined. He's on the rocks now, and he has to take that offer. He just has to!"

"Yessir."

The black mass turned, and Janice could again see the city lights

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reflected from Arnheim's unblinking eyes. "In a few months, O'Hara's name won't be worth the spit it takes to say it."

Janice saw the black mass's head nod, then become still. "Good night, Mr. Arnheim." She waited for an answer; and when none came, she turned, opened the door and left the office. As she closed the door behind her, she nodded at a mousy fellow clad in grey and black plaids. "It's no use, Mr. Stone."

Milton Stone nodded, then smiled. "That's it, then. The board can't stop the current stunt he's pulling in his personal vendetta, but we can certainly cut off his water after tomorrow." He nodded again, then left.

Janice looked at Arnheim's door and wondered if she should extinguish the lights to the outer office. Karl Arnheim always used to storm over every needless expenditure, although of late he seemed obsessed with other things. But he'd need the light to find his way to the elevators if he went home. Janice shrugged. Karl Arnheim hadn't gone home for three days. She turned off the lights and left.

SEVEN

Route Book, O'Hara's Greater Shows
6 June 2144.

After getting kicked off of Wallabee for our little tiff with the Abe Show, O'Hara's Greater Shows was decidedly between a mineral mass and an unyielding location. It was not only that interrupting the show's schedule interfered with the Governor's payments on the *City of Baraboo,* although this weighed heavily upon O'Hara's mind. Erkev IV, the Monarch of Ahngar, had come through with eighty million credits when nothing less would save the ship; and the Governor felt a special obligation to make good the loan. If the 2144 season had gone as well as had been expected, the loan would have been paid off by laying-up time. But after having a third of our scheduled stands blown by being evicted from Wallabee, O'Hara had doubts about meeting the payroll.

We had made orbit around Ahngar to replace the equipment and people lost in the contest with the Abe Show; and the Governor was working with the route man, Rat Man Jack, trying to piece together a makeshift route to fill out the season. There were only three planets within an economical distance of Vistunya and Groleth—our two remaining scheduled planets—and none of the three had even been played by O'Hara's, or any other show. Deciding upon a new

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planet is very complicated, involving a great deal of investigation. Visiting one of the three untried planets, if the stand was unsuccessful, would ruin us. The Governor had gone over the information that he had on the planets and had just about decided to run out the first third of the season on Ahngar. It was too recent to play the larger cities again, but he figured there were probably enough smaller towns remaining that we could keep losses down and break even for the season.

Rat Man and I were in the *Baraboo*'s wardroom cutting up jackpots and becoming very depressed about the season, when Fish Face Frank, the side show director, came by and told us that we were wanted in the Governor's office. Fish Face went with us, and when we arrived, the Governor nodded and introduced us to a very dapper fellow, striped trousers and maroon frocked coat with rings on six of his fingers and a big shiner stuck in his pearl colored cravat. He had one of those skinny, straight moustaches, and black hair greased back against his head.

The Governor pointed at us in turn. "This is Fish Face Frank Gillis, director of the kid show. He'll be giving the orders." The man nodded, held out a hand and smiled as he shook hands with Fish Face. "Rat Man Jack Savage, our route man, and Warts Tho. Warts keeps the route book." Nods and hand shaking. "Boys, this is Boston Beau Dancer."

The three of us could have been pitched off our pins by a feather. Everyone had heard of the notorious Boston Beau, King of the Grifters; but we had never expected to see him trouping with our show. Everyone knew what the Governor thought of grifters. We mumbled a few appropriate responses, then sat down on chairs around the Governor's desk.

O'Hara rubbed his chin, cleared his throat, then leaned back in his chair. "Boys, you know what kind of trouble we're in. Boston Beau has made me an offer that I can't bring myself to turn down. In exchange for the usual privileges, he will pay enough to guarantee the remainder of the debt on the *Baraboo* and to assure us a profit for the first third of the season. This means—"

"Grifters?" Fish Face went red. "I don't get it, Mr. John! O'Hara's has never had grifters before. What about our reputation?"

O'Hara shrugged. "I can't see any other way out, Fish Face. I hope you'll see—"

"I won't see nothing! I quit!" Fish Face stood, turned and stormed out of the compartment.

The Governor turned back to Boston Beau. "I apologize, but it'll

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take some time for Fish Face to get used to the idea."

Boston Beau smiled, displaying two gold teeth among his otherwise immaculate collection. "A man in my profession cannot afford to take offense, Mr. O'Hara." He drew a small lace cloth from his sleeve, sniffed at it, then tucked it back in the sleeve. "To make certain we have our terms straight, in exchange for my payment to you of twenty-two million credits, my boys will take over the ticket windows, run the games, and we will keep all that we make. Also, I must fix my own towns and keep my people separated from the rest of the show."

"That's for the first planet. If we are both satisfied at the conclusion of the first third of the season, you have an option to renew your offer, Boston Beau." The Governor nodded at me. "Also, there is the thing I discussed with you."

Boston Beau looked at me, then smiled. "That's hardly a condition. I would be honored."

The Governor nodded. "Good."

Boston Beau turned to Rat Man, then back to O'Hara. "I know there will be ripe pickings wherever you put down the show, but I am curious to know where it will be."

O'Hara looked at Rat Man. "Read Boston the figures on Chyteew, Rat Man."

Rat Man Jack pulled a pad from his pocket, opened it, then smiled. "Yes, Mr. John. The population is concentrated into urban production and commercial centers. No circus has performed on Chyteew before, but there are entertainments, and they are supported. The gross product of the planet for the year 2143 was ninety-one trillion credits, with first quarter figures for this year showing a sixteen percent increase—"

Boston Beau held up his hand. "That's all I need to know." He stood, bent over Mr. John's desk, and shook his hand. "I'll have my people and the money together and up here in ten hours." He turned toward me. "Come along, Warts. You're to stick to me like a second skin."

I turned toward O'Hara. "Mr. John?"

The Governor nodded. "Boston Beau and his people represent a distasteful, but historically valid, part of the circus. I've arranged with him to have you accompany him during his stay with us, and he has promised to talk your ear off about his operations."

Boston Beau bowed as the door opened, then held out his hand. "After you, Warts."

I shrugged, stood, and walked through the door.

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EIGHT

7 June 2144.

I was distressed, as was the rest of the company, at turning *The* Circus into a grift show. Despite this, I quickly found myself caught up in the strange world of the "lucky boys." Boston Beau and I took a shuttle down planetside, then hopped around to several different cities, each time picking up one or two of Boston's associates. "A grifter can always make a living on his own, Warts, but to make the real coin, you have to be tied in with a show. A circus is the natural habitat of the *Trimabulis Suckerus;* therefore, that is where a true scientist should observe and pluck them."

"Scientist?"

Boston Beau grinned, flashing his two golden teeth. "We are not gamblers, my lumpy friend. Gamblers take chances." He pointed at one of the passengers in the shuttle, an overweight fellow wearing a brown and tan suit. He was slouched in his couch and had his cap, a flat straw affair, pulled over his eyes. "That's Jack Jack, one of our most eminent scientists. He operates a Three Card Monte game—"

"He's a card shark."

Boston Beau shrugged. "Now, there is a bigoted reference if I ever heard one. Not only is Jack Jack a scientist, he is an artist as well."

I rubbed my chin and nodded. Three Card Monte had been described to me, and it sounded simple. Three cards are placed, on a flat surface. One card is picked by the "sucker" then placed face down along with the other two. The card shark then moves the cards around, stops, then invites the customer to turn over his card. I smiled, because Pendiians have very sharp eyes, and I prided myself on my ability to detect sleight-of-hand maneuvers. I turned to Boston. "I'd like to see a little of this so-called science."

Boston motioned with his hand and we both stood and went over to the couches facing the slumbering Jack Jack. We sat down, Boston next to the window and I directly across from the obese card mechanic. Boston leaned forward and said quietly, "Jack Jack, I have a seeker of wisdom for you."

Jack Jack animated one arm and pushed the straw hat back on his head with a single finger. The tiny, dull eyes looked at me for an instant. "So, my boy, you have come to learn, eh?"

I sneered and raised my brows. "I'd like to see a little of this Three Card Monte. It doesn't sound too difficult."

Jack Jack's face remained impassive as he reached into his coat.

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"Ah, yes. A lesson of great value hovers above your bumpy head; and when that lesson settles about your shoulders, you shall understand science."

Boston Beau pulled the folding table out from the bulkhead and locked it in place. "Jack Jack, it is part of my arrangement with the Governor that we do not trim the other members of the company."

Jack Jack shrugged. "Scientific research must be funded, Boston Beau. If this fellow—what's his name?"

"This is Warts Tho, from Pendiia. He works the route book, and Mr. John has him doing a little history of us."

Jack Jack nodded as he pulled a deck of cards from his pocket. The deck was sealed. "A Pendiian, eh?"

I nodded. "That's right."

"Pendiians are quick with their eyes, aren't they?"

I smiled, detecting a crack in Jack Jack's façade of confidence. "Very quick."

Jack Jack broke the seal on the deck, opened the box and pulled out the cards. He spread them on the table, face up, and pulled two Jacks out. He looked up at me. "You have a favorite card?"

I shrugged, then reached forward and pulled out the ace of hearts. "That one."

Jack Jack gathered up the remaining cards, placed them in the box, and returned the box to his pocket. As he placed the three cards face up in a row, he talked to Boston Beau. "As I was saying, scientific research must be funded. I have expenses to meet, equipment to keep up. Why, have you seen the price of cards lately? This fellow will be learning something that will always be of use to him, and surely that is worth a small investment."

Boston Beau looked at me and I turned to Jack Jack. "What kind of investment are you talking about?"

The corners of Jack Jack's mouth turned down. "Oh, my boy, just enough to satisfy custom. A friendly sum—say, one credit?"

Boston Beau poked me in the arm as I nodded at Jack Jack. "Please remember to tell Mr. John that I tried to discourage this transaction. Agreed?"

"Agreed." I pulled a credit note from my pocket, placed it on the table, and it was soon joined with a note Jack Jack peeled from an enormous wad of bills. He returned the wad to his pocket, then arranged the cards, ace in the middle. "Now, my boy, what I will do is to turn these cards over, rearrange them, and then you must find the ace."

"I understand."

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I watched closely as Jack Jack flipped over each card with a snap, then straightened out the row. I could see a small bend in the corner of the center card, a bend that only a Pendiian could see. Jack Jack moved the cards around slowly, and it was easy to follow the ace. He stopped, looked at me, and smiled. "And now, seeker of truth, can you find the ace?"

I turned over the card to my right and placed it face up. It was the ace. "There."

Jack Jack's eyebrows went up. "Well, my boy, you do have fast eyes. Would you care to try another game?" He pulled the wad from his pocket.

I pointed at the two credit notes on the table. "Very well. I'll bet two."

Jack Jack peeled off two credits, added them to mine, then arranged the cards again, ace in the middle. He turned them over with a snap each time, then moved them around. But this time the cards moved with such speed and complexity of motion that I lost track. He stopped the cards, arranged them in a row, then grinned. "And, now, my boy, the ace."

I looked at the cards feeling a little foolish, until I saw that the card on the left had the slight bend in it that I recognized. I pointed at it. "That one?"

Jack Jack reached out his hand. "Let's see—ah! The ace! My, but don't you have fast eyes?" He frowned. "You wouldn't consider trying it one more time, would you?"

The space between my ears was filled with visions of Jack Jack's roll of credits. I reached into my pocket, pulled out the forty-three credits that remained from my week's pay and added them to the four credits already on the table. Jack Jack pursed his lips, frowned, then pulled out his roll. "Warts, my boy, you appear pretty sure of yourself."

I nodded, and he peeled off forty-seven credits and added them to the pile. He arranged the cards, ace in the middle, then flipped them over, each one with a snap. "And now, my boy, the lesson."

The cards moved so fast that I couldn't follow the ace, but I didn't try. I waited for the cards to stop, then looked for the card with the bend. All three cards had identical bends. "Ah . . . "

"Pick out the ace, my quick-eyed friend."

I reached out my hand, hovered it over the left card, then moved it and picked up the middle card. It was a Jack. As Jack Jack gathered up the credit notes he made a disgusting slurping sound with his mouth. Boston Beau folded up the table, then stood, pulling

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me to my feet. "Thank you, Jack Jack. I'm certain that Warts found the demonstration very enlightening."

I was feeling pretty hot. "But . . . "

Boston Beau steered me back to our couches, then plunked me down in mine and resumed sitting in his own. "As I said, Warts, a science." He turned toward me and flashed his dental bullion. "Notice how he got you to rely upon that bend in the card?"

I frowned. "You could see it?"

Boston Beau shook his head. "No, but I knew it was there. You're a Pendiian, and Jack Jack bent the card accordingly. Since you thought you had won twice on the basis of an unfair edge, a bend you could see and that the dealer could not, you could hardly protest when all three cards came up with the same bend."

I glowered at the back of the couch in front of me. "What was that sound he made?"

Boston Beau frowned, then smiled. "Oh, that. Didn't you ever wonder where the term 'sucker' comes from?" He frowned and rubbed his chin. "Come to think of it, though, considering the direction in which the money went, I guess that would make Jack Jack the sucker." He smiled at me. "That would make you the suckee."

I looked back at Jack Jack He was again slouched in his couch, hands clasped over his belly, hat over his eyes.

NINE

12 June 2144.

After a few days with the slick gentlemen, I was convinced that the population of Chyteew would be plucked naked by the time the show moved on to Vistunya. "Science" is such a poor word to describe the method of these fast-fingered fellows. Boston Beau Dancer began his career back on Earth as a "dip" —a pickpocket. When I expressed disbelief that anyone could put hands into my pockets without my being aware of the event, Boston Beau handed me back my billfold, pocket knife, and small change, and then explained the difference between a street scene and a show scene when dipping for leathers.

"Warts, a street dip works with at least one other person, sometimes two. The ideal in such circumstances is to have number one attract the touch's attention, while number two—the dip—lifts the leather, then palms it off to number three to get rid of the evidence. A terrible waste of manpower. Working the push at a circus is

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different—it's mass production. The dips spread out in the crowd, then I'll get up on a stand and call attention to myself. Once everyone it watching, I will explain to the touches that it has been reported that there are pickpockets working the show, and that everyone should keep a close watch on their belongings, and thank you kindly."

"You warn them?"

Boston Beau nodded. "As soon as they are warned, the first thing they do is grab for wherever it is that they keep their coin. The dips in the crowd note the locations, then the only limit on leathers is how much you can carry."

Working for the benefit of all, the steerers would wander the streets of the large city nearest the show, looking for high rollers who could be coaxed onto the lot to investigate the games. There they would witness a happy customer or two win a few games of Leary Belt, Three Card Monte, Innocent Strap, Shell-and-Pea, or whatever, thereby becoming convinced that the game could be beaten. These happy "customers," known as "cappers," were associates of Boston Beau. "Science" is such a feeble word with which to describe the methods the slick gentlemen used to part the sucker from his credits. And as my faith in my nimble Pendiian eyes diminished, my respect for the grifters increased. It takes no small amount of courage—no matter how corrupted—to sit behind a flimsy table by yourself and steal a hard rock miner's money under his nose with no one near by except the hulking brute's friends and relatives. I suppose my respect for the lucky boys could have flowered into admiration, except their lessons were beggaring me.

Since my own research fund had expired, I asked questions and took notes. "A thing I don't quite understand, Boston Beau, is how you can afford to pay Mr. John twenty-two million credits for the privileges. I mean, you're paying *him* to sell *his* tickets."

Boston Beau scratched his chin, looked up, and did some mental calculations. When he was finished, he looked back at me. "How much did the show take in last season—about twenty, twenty-five million?"

"About that."

He nodded. "Say that you are a customer. You come up to the ticket window to buy your two and a quarter credit ticket. You hand me—the ticket seller—a ten or twenty credit note; let's say a ten. Now, I give you four and three quarters credits back—"

"No. You'd owe me *seven* and three quarters."

He raised his brows. "I'm not disputing that, Warts. I owe you

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seven and three quarters, but all you get is four and three quarters."

"How . . .?"

Boston Beau grinned. "If after all your research you have a tenner left, I'd be pleased to take you over to Ten Scalps Tim and have him show you how it's done."

I glowered at the grifter for a moment. "No. I don't think so."

Boston Beau nodded and smiled. "See? Look at how much you have already learned." He clasped his hands together. "Now, just about everyone who goes to the show will have set money aside for it, and it's always in big bills. Maybe one out of twenty customers pays with the exact change. That means that, after deducting the amount I have to pay Mr. John—the two and a quarter credits—my profit is three credits. It's even more for larger bills. The standard short on a twenty is eight credits, and on a fifty is twenty-two."

"But, what happens when the customer counts his change and finds it short?"

"By then the line behind has pushed him out of the way, or if it hasn't, a couple of the boys working with the shortchange artist will shoulder him away from the window. Then, when the sucker puts up the big holler, the man at the window says he should have counted his change before leaving the window." He held out his hands. "I mean, it is not reasonable to expect the ticket man to pay such an unfounded claim—a guy just walking up and saying, 'Hey, you gave me the wrong change.' The crowd shouts the guy down, he gets embarrassed and usually walks off. If he persists, puts up a big enough squawk, or threatens to bring in the coppers, I'll take him aside and pay him off to keep him out of our hair."

"But, still, the amount you paid the Governor—"

"I'll clear as much out of the ticket windows as the show does, without the same expenses. Of course, that doesn't count the games—and the dips. All in all, on a planet such as Ahngar, my associates could clear thirty or fourty million in a third of a season. I expect to double that on a planet as wealthy as Chyteew." He grinned and flashed his gold teeth. "And just think, they've never seen a show before." He closed his eyes, leaned back in his couch and said with a touch of ecstasy in his voice. "Ripe. *So* ripe."

TEN

15 June 2144.

The day before we made orbit around Chyteew, I stormed into the

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Governor's office. "How . . . how can you turn those . . . those . . . grifters loose on those people? We'll ruin Chyteew for circuses forever!"

O'Hara rubbed his chin, then nodded. "How is your education coming along, Warts?"

"Mr. John . . . " I flapped my arms about for a bit. "I can't see why you are doing this! We could have at least broken even on the season, and the Monarch won't press for his money. You know that."

He shook his head. "One blow down, one fire, a couple of blown dates—that's all it would have taken to wipe us out. I couldn't risk losing the show. That's why I had to take them on. There's another reason." He frowned and clasped his hands together, then shook his head. "But that's personal." He held out his hands and shrugged. "Should I have risked the show, Warts? Throw this all away, just because of a few scruples that together wouldn't buy a bale of hay for the bulls?"

"I . . . I don't know!"

I stomped out of there, walked up to the family quarters at the center of the ship, thinking to talk to Duckfoot. When the door to his quarters opened, Diane, Queen of the Flying Trapeze, was standing there.

"Warts."

"Where's Duckfoot?"

"He's down in the canvas shuttle." She stepped out of the doorway. "Come in. You seem worried."

I entered and the door closed behind me. "I am."

"Is it something to do with the tops?" She pointed at a couch and I sat. In front of me, Sweetie Pie was dangling from the overhead by her teeth. Diane nodded at her daughter. "Sweetie Pie is working on an iron jaw act. If she gets it down, the Director of the Ballet says she can join this season."

I gave a weak smile to the girl, then turned to Diane. "It's about these grifters Mr. John's taken on."

"What about them?"

"Is this a time for jokes?" I snorted. "They'll ruin the show, that's all!"

While Sweetie Pie lowered herself from the overhead, Diane seated herself across from me and smiled. "I'm certain that the Governor wouldn't do anything to harm the show, Warts. It's his life."

"He's doing it. Maybe he can't see it."

Sweetie Pie walked over and stood in front of me, hands on hips.

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"Duckfoot says the Governor knows what he's doing, and if that's what Duckfoot says, then that's what we say."

I stood, went to the door and stopped. "Blind loyalty such as that earned the Pendiian monarchy several beheadings!"

Sweetie Pie held up her nose. "Warts, are you planning on taking off Duckfoot's head?"

"Bah!" I stomped out of there, blazed my way through the corridors to the main sleeping bay, then flopped on my cot, frowning until my bumps collided.

The show was everything to the Governor. He had been with the thing as a poor, insignificant tent show back on Earth, and he had pioneered the star road. To save that, I suppose the Governor would even kill. But taking on the grifters would destroy the show's reputation, which would mean a fall-off in customers, more clems with the towners, and eventually being frozen off planet by most or all of the profitable stands that the show had developed. We had all heard how the lucky boys had upset things on Ahngar, and it was only by the grace of the show being off planet that the grifters didn't taint the show. Even so, the Monarch's representative came to O'Hara to ask what could be done about it. Well, the Monarch's problem was solved. But now we had the disease, and soon it would launder the people of Chyteew.

While I was fuming away, Fish Face Frank Gillis, the kid show director, came into the sleeping bay. He saw me, then looked around to see if anyone was within earshot. Satisfied that he would not be overheard, he walked over and sat on a built-in bunk opposite mine. "You look a little upset, Warts."

I turned my head and studied Fish Face. His large, half-closed eyes, along with his thick lips and chinless face, appeared calm. "You don't, which is kind of strange, considering why you quit."

Fish Face nodded. "That's because I made up my mind to do something about it. Can't stand grifters—never could. When the show puts down on Chyteew, I'm going to fix the slick gentlemen."

I sat up and faced him. "What are you going to do?"

Fish Face looked around again, then looked back at me. "I'm going to need some help. You in?"

I frowned. "I don't know. What—are you . . . are you going to holler *copper*?"

He lifted a finger and held it in front of his mouth. "Shhhh! Are you trying to get our heads massaged with tent stakes?"

"But, calling copper?"

Fish Face leaned forward. "I can't think of any other way to save

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the show. If we can get to the coppers on Chyteew and have them put the arm on the grifters at the first stand, maybe too much won't be made about it."

I looked down and shook my head. "I don't know, Fish Face. If anyone found out about it, we'd be poison on an O'Hara lot for the rest of our days."

He reached out a hand and clamped it on my arm. "You're a trouper, Warts. You know it's the right thing to do. Are you in?"

I thought hard, then swung my legs up and stretched out on my bunk. "What do I have to do?"

Fish Face nodded, then got to his feet. "The *War Eagle* from the advance will be up to report to the Governor as soon as we make orbit. We'll go back with her planetside and drop off at the first stand along with the twenty-four-hour man. Then we go into town and see what we can do."

ELEVEN

15 June 2144.

As luck would have it, as the *War Eagle* docked with the *Baraboo,* Boston Beau Dancer decided to join us on our trip planetside, "to size up the local sucker stock" as he put it. No one on the *Baraboo,* except the advance and the route man, had ever been to Chyteew before; and Boston Beau wanted to get the lay of the land. Fish Face and I were friendly because we didn't want to give ourselves away. It was not easy. At the lot near Marthaan, we bid Tick Tock goodbye; and then the three of us set out on foot toward the tall buildings. The Asthu, the natives ruling Chyteew, are built along the general proportions of an ostrich egg, although considerably taller, with thick, blunt-toed legs and thin, four-fingered arms. Several times, walking down one of the many business malls in Marthaan, Boston Beau deliberately stepped in front of one of the egg-shaped creatures. The Asthu would bump into Boston Beau, utter a rapid, incomprehensible apology, then waddle on.

Boston Beau would grin and mutter, "Ripe. *So* ripe."

I frowned at him after he had bumped into his fourth pedestrian. "Why are you doing that?"

He cocked his head at the push of the crowd working its way into a business exchange. "Look at their eyes, Warts. Small and practically at the sides of their round head-ends. They can't see directly in front. Can you imagine what a man like Jack Jack can do to

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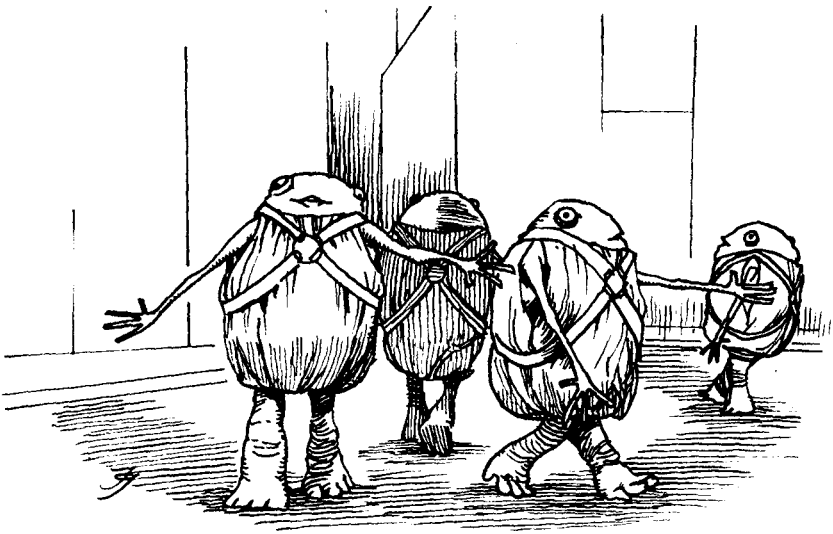

these people?" He cackled, then waved goodbye to us as he followed the push into the business exchange. "I think I'll check out what they like to do with their credits."

We waved back, then I stopped Fish Face and turned toward him. "Can you imagine what Boston Beau's gang will do here?"

Fish Face nodded without changing expression. Then, he pointed toward one of the creatures dressed in white belts who appeared to be directing foot traffic at one of the mall intersections. I felt slightly sick when I realized that the Asthu needed traffic cops to keep pedestrians from running into each other. "There's a copper. Let's find out where his station is."

We walked up to the egg in white belts and I began. "Could you tell me where the police station is?"

I was standing directly in front of the officer, and he rotated until he brought one of his eyes around to face me. It went wide, then he staggered backwards a step. "Mig ballooma!"

"Police station?" I tried again.

Slightly recovered, the officer took a step toward us, scanned with one eye, then the other. "Egger bley sirkis."

"What?"

The officer pointed at me then at Fish Face. "Sirkis, sirkis, dether et?"

Fish Face poked me in the arm. "Listen, he's saying 'circus.' "

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The tiny mouth on the egg rapidly became much larger, then the entire body dipped back and forth. "Sirkis! Sirkis!" As the bodies began piling up at the intersection, the officer reached beneath one of his white belts and pulled out a red and white card. "Sirkis!"

I looked at it, then turned to Fish Face. "It's an advanced reserve ticket for the show." I turned back to the officer and nodded. "Yes, circus. Police station?"

He tucked the card back under his belt, then held up his hands. "Nethy bleu et 'poleece stayshun' duma?" A lane of traffic mistook the officer's hand gesture for a signal and began piling into the cross lane flow. "Gaavuuk!" The officer scanned around once, then waded into the bodies, shouting, pointing, and shoving. After a few minutes of this, traffic began flowing again, and the officer returned. He pointed at a door a few paces from the corner. "Agwug, tuwhap thubba."

I pointed in the direction of the door. "Police station?"

He held up his arms again in that gesture that was probably a shrug, thereby causing the halted lane to pile into the cross lane again. "Ah, Gaavuuk! Nee gaavuuk!" Back he went to untangle the bodies. Fish Face pulled at my arm and pointed at the door.

"I think we better go before the copper comes back. Think that's the station?"

I shrugged. "Let's try it anyway." We walked the few steps to the door. On the door was painted a variety of incomprehensible lines, dots, squiggles and smears. Toward the bottom was spelled out: **English Spoke Hear.** I nodded, then turned to Fish Face. "It's an interpreter." I pushed open the door and we entered a cramped, windowless stall. In the back, behind a low counter, one of the egg shaped creatures was leaning in a corner.

Fish Face tapped me on the shoulder. "Is he asleep?"

I walked over to the counter and tapped on it. "Excuse me?" No response. I knocked harder. "Excuse me, do you speak English?"

The egg opened the eye facing me, started a bit, blinked then went big in the mouth. "SIRKIS!" He stood and reached under the wide brown belt he wore and pulled out an advanced reserve ticket. "Sirkis!"

I nodded. "Yes, we're with the circus." I turned to Fish Face. "Stretch Dirak and the advance have done quite a job." I turned back. "Do you speak English?"

The mouth went big again as the eyes squinted. "English spoke here."

"What's your name?"

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"Name are Docco-thut, well sirs." Docco-thut dipped forward in the good egg's version of a bow.

I smiled. "We need an interpreter."

"English spoke hear."

"Yes, can you come with us? We want to go to the police station."

Docco-thut rotated a bit, went down behind the counter and came up again carrying a book. He held it up to one eye and began paging through it. "Police . . . police . . . hmmm. Regulation of community affairs . . . community . . . community, ah . . . hmmm . . . station . . . hmmm." Docco-thut put the book down and faced an eye toward me. "You want to operate a radio?"

Fish Face placed a hand on my shoulder. "Let me give it a try." He wiggled a finger at Docco-thut. "Come with me."

Docco-thut pressed a button, part of the counter top slid open, and he walked through the opening. He followed Fish Face to the door. Out in the mall, Fish Face pointed at the traffic cop. "Police."

Docco-thut aimed an eye at Fish Face. "You want police radio?"

Fish Face shook his head. "Take us to the police's boss."

Docco-thut went back to the book. "Boss . . . circular protuberance or knoblike swelling—"

Fish Face took the book. "Allow me!" He found the definition he wanted, faced the book at Docco-thut, then pointed with his finger. "Boss. Supervisor, employer."

Docco-thut nodded his body. "You want control unit of traffic persons. You all I take for half credit."

I reached into my pockets and found them well laundered. "Fish Face, you have any money?"

Fish Face pulled out two quarter credit pieces and held them out to Docco-thut. Docco-thut took them, then shook his whole body. "You no account have?"

"Account?"

The body nodded. "Credit Exchange. You no account have at Credit Exchange?"

Fish Face and I shook our heads. Docco-thut shook his body again, then turned around. He studied the mall for a few moments, then began walking. I came up beside him. "Are we going to the control unit of traffic persons?"

Docco-thut pointed at a box set into the wall a few steps away. "Exchange." He stopped at the box, pushed the two coins inside, then spoke to it. "Docco-thut, temay, ooch, ooch, soog, temay, dis, ooch; simik cho." He turned from the box. "Now, control unit of traffic persons."

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TWELVE

15 June 2144.

It became clear, after much talking and numerous references to *English As She Is Spoke,* that traffic persons are concerned only with traffic; they are not coppers. The boss traffic person at the control unit directed Docco-thut to take Fish Face and me to the local crime rectification unit. The boss crime rectification person was a tough-looking egg wearing a blue belt. Fortunately Tuggeth-norz, as he was called, managed to scare up an interpreter at the station with a little more experience. We bid Docco-thut a fond goodbye; and laid another credit on him, which he promptly dumped into one of those exchange boxes before leaving the station. In way of parting, he held up his advanced reserve ticket and said, "At sirkis, see you."

After the boss copper and his interpreter pulled their tickets and showed them to us, we got down to the business at hand. "Tuggeth-norz, there are grifters working the show."

The interpreter, Goobin-stu, waddled around for a bit, then asked me. "What are 'grifters' please?"

I held out my hands. "Grifters—dips, shorters, card sharks, shell workers . . . " I could tell from the interpreter's expression that I wasn't getting through. "Do you know what a pickpocket is?"

Goobin-stu whipped out his own copy of *English As She Is Spoke,* then flipped through the pages, came to the proper page and read. He opened his eyes wide, then studied both Fish Face and myself. Putting down the book, he turned me around and started jabbering at Tuggeth-norz, pointing at my hip pocket, more jabbering, in went his hand pulling forth my billfold, more jabbering, then Goobin-stu returned my billfold. As I replaced my billfold, I turned and faced the boss crime rectification person. Tuggeth-norz's eyes became very tiny as he clasped his arms around his middle. Then, the eyes grew wider and he held up his hands and jabbered at Goobin-stu. The interpreter turned to us and said. "Is not crime."

"What?"

"Is not crime picking pockets. Tuggeth-norz says it not in law."

I scratched my head. "Do you mean your law never got around to making picking pockets a crime?"

Goobin-stu held up his hands. "Why should it? No pockets."

I looked around the station room. The Asthuians there all wore the blue belts, but no pockets. I turned back to Goobin-stu. "Well, where do you keep your money?"

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"Money?" He then made a honking sound, jabbered at Tuggethnorz, who then joined him. When they stopped honking, the interpreter shook his body. "We keep money in the Credit Exchange. If we did not, we would have to carry it in our hands." He honked again.

"Well, what about crooked games? There will be crooked games at the show."

Blank stares. Goobin-stu held up his hands. "Crooked games?"

"Games of chance, dishonest."

Goobin-stu scratched at the side of his head, shook his body, then held up his hands. "So?"

On the way back to the lot, Fish Face and I radiated gloom. Fish Face kept shaking his head. "I don't believe it; I just don't believe it." He turned toward me as we walked up to the front yard entrance. "You mean those eggs don't have a word for 'honest'?"

I nodded. "Which means that they don't have a word for 'dishonest'." I shook my head. "Which means that anything dishonest is not a crime."

Fish Face kicked a small stone. "Which means that Boston Beau and his gang are going to make coin like they owned the mint."

I followed the stone with my eyes, then looked up to see Ten Scalps Tim's gloomy face peering from behind the bars of the ticket window. There was no line in front of the cage but the lot behind the ticket wagon was crammed with honking Asthuians being directed by white-belted traffic control persons. Latecomers were presenting advance reserved tickets at the gate and were being passed through. We nodded at the gate man, then moved onto the lot toward the side show. The Asthuians were listening to spielers, moving into shows and coming out from other attractions. But, something was wrong. No one was selling any tickets. Fish Face and I walked up to Motor Mouth, the spieler for the Great Ozamund. He had just concluded his patter, pointed with his cane at the entrance to the show, and leaned forward on his stand as he watched the crowd of honking Asthuians pushing to get into the tent.

Motor Mouth turned away and saw Fish Face and me. "Did you ever see anything like it? They can't understand a word I'm saying, but they stand and listen. If my performance is enthusiastic enough, they go in and watch the show." He smiled and said in a lowered voice. "I don't mind telling you that my spieling is pulling in a bigger crowd for Ozzie than old Electric Lips across the way is getting for Zel."

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I looked at Madam Zelda's spieler and duly noted the smaller crowd observing Electric Lips' performance. I turned back to Motor Mouth. "Why aren't you selling tickets?"

He shrugged. "The Governor's orders. These folks don't carry money." Then he shook his head. "Mr. John says we can trust them for it."

I looked up and down the midway. "Where are the grifters?"

Motor Mouth shrugged. "Gone, I guess. They weren't getting any business." He stood. "Got to get back to work, Warts. By the way, Mr. John said he wanted to see you two when you came back on the lot."

I nodded, then Fish Face and I left the midway and headed for the office wagon. Mr. John was sitting on the stairs observing the Asthuian lot lice and chuckling to himself. When he saw us he got to his feet. "Well, you two, are you going to have an army of coppers dropping on us?"

I grimaced while Fish Face shook his head. We came to a stop in front of him, then I folded my arms. "Mr. John, what's going on? Why aren't the kid shows selling tickets, and where are the lucky boys, and—"

O'Hara held up his hands, then rubbed them together. "One at a time, Warts." He looked at Fish Face. "Good to have you back."

Fish Face nodded. "I'd like to hear some answers, too, Mr. John."

O'Hara smiled, clasped his hands behind his back, and bounced back and forth from his toes to his heels. "Well, about the sideshow tickets, they don't carry any money. What they'll do is keep in mind what they owe, then the next time they pass one of those credit exchange terminals each one will transfer the proper amount to the show's account."

I scratched my head. "Are you sure you can trust them?"

"Why, yes, Warts. I didn't believe it when Rat Man first gave me the information on this planet, but here it is. They simply have no conception of dishonesty, stealing, cheating. Also, they are not what you might call impulse buyers. Everyone who wanted to attend the show made up their minds when the advance went through and bought reserved tickets."

"What about the grifters?"

O'Hara's grin evidenced that he was approaching the favorite part of his revelations. "To be sucked in by a grifter, you have to have a little grifter in your soul. Something for nothing is something these folks just don't understand."

I rubbed my chin, then nodded. "You can't cheat an honest

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man—or Asthuian." I nodded again. "The show is going to make a bundle on Chyteew, isn't it?"

"Looks that way."

I pursed my lips. "And the money you got from Boston Beau is still yours."

He shrugged. "I lived up to my part of the bargain."

"Is that it?"

O'Hara bounced on his toes and heels some more. "Well, the Monarch of Ahngar did offer to discharge the rest of the amount owed on the *City of Baraboo* if I'd get the slick gentlemen off his planet—" The Governor looked up, then smiled as he saw Boston Beau Dancer approaching.

"Mr. John." Boston Beau stopped, nodded at Fish Face and myself, then turned back to the Governor. "What about at the end of your tour on Chyteew? Can my boys get transportation to Vistunya?"

The Governor nodded. "As we agreed, if at the conclusion of our stay on Chyteew you wish to renew your offer, I will accept."

Boston Beau raised his brows, pursed his lips, and cocked his head to one side. "Another twenty-two million credits?"

O'Hara nodded, then opened the door to the office wagon. "That was the agreement." He smiled. "See you then." He entered the wagon and closed the door. Fish Face chuckled and walked off.

Boston Beau shook his head, turned, and began walking slowly toward the front entrance. I just couldn't resist. "Hey, Boston Beau!"

He turned back and glowered at me. "What."

I made the longest, most disgusting slurping sound that I could manage. The slick gentleman stared at me for an instant, then he smiled, waved, and left laughing.

IN THE CART

THIRTEEN

14 April 2148.

Enroute to H'dgva, the first planet of O'Hara's Greater Shows' tour of Tenth Quadrant planets. The last star system containing an inhabited planet was passed twenty-four days ago, and it will be another twenty days until we reach H'dgva. Today we will cross the border between the Ninth and Tenth Quadrants—the first star show ever to do so . . .

Jon Norden, Chief Engineer for the circus ship, *City of Baraboo,*

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sat slumped at his bridge station studying the match indicators for the ship's Bellenger pods. The mass tranceivers had been cranky ever since the show left its laying-up grounds on Badner. With the pods in operation, the *Baraboo* crossed distances at several times the speed of light, while theoretically moving no faster than two hundred kilometers per hour. Without the pods—something Jon felt in his bones might be a distinct possibility—the *Baraboo* could make a maximum of six thousand kilometers per second under emergency impulse power. He didn't even want to think about the thousand centuries or so that it would take to get back to civilization at that speed. But that was their only option if the pods malfunctioned. Unmatched Bellenger pods, if used, would atomize the ship, leaving O'Hara's Greater Shows nothing but a memory and a cloud of subatomic particles.

Jon completed his fourth computer check on the pods, pursed his lips, then looked around at the long, low rectangle of the ship's bridge. In the center of the bridge stood a small, cloth-draped table. Before the table, Wall-eyed Mike Ikona, the ship's Boss Porter, prepared the crystal and champagne for the line-crossing ceremony. On the other side of the table, toward the front of the compartment, Bald Willy Coogan occupied his place in the Chief Pilot's chair, while standing next to Bald Willy was the Governor. John J. O'Hara kept his eyes toward the forward view ports almost as though he were searching for the border by sight.

Turning back to his instrument panel, Jon rubbed his chin and frowned. All indicators read green. Everything was fine. Not even a minor adjustment had been needed for the past three hours. Jon rubbed his chin again. Maybe things were just a little *too* fine. He reached forward and punched his comm for the rear engineering section. "Animal, you there?"

"I'm here, Pirate. Watcha want?"

Jon smiled at the nickname. Everyone with a circus had to have a special name, almost as much as clerics on Earth adopted names when they joined priesthoods. Pirate Jon had gotten his when he led his fellow workers at the Arnheim & Boon Conglomerated Enterprises orbiting shipyard in securing the *City of Baraboo*—some might say stealing—for the show. Jon drummed his fingers on the armrest of his swivel seat. "Animal, get a crew down to the pods. I want the access ports pulled and both pod assemblies gone over with microscopes."

"I don't see anything down here. You have a reading?"

Jon shook his head. "Just a bone tickle. Tell me what you find."

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"Engineering's putting on quite a party for crossing the line. My boys will sure hate to miss it."

"So, sign on and troup with another show." He chuckled. "I'll save you some of that sparkle juice."

As the Second Engineer signed off, Jon wondered about the crew of riggers, welders, mechanics, and technicians that had followed him when he stole the ship from the yard. Karl Arnheim, the A in A&BCE, had tried to have them all arrested, and failing that, he had blackballed them from one end of the Ninth Quadrant to the other. The few who had tried to obtain shipbuilding work at various stands had always come back. The freeze was on, but never a complaint, never a regret.

"You look a little down in the mouth, Pirate."

Jon turned his head and looked up. "Oh, hi, Mr. John."

"I heard you tell Animal to check out the pods. Something wrong?"

Jon turned back to his instruments and shrugged. "Just a feeling. We've had so much trouble with them this far, I'd sleep a lot better if Animal had a look."

O'Hara nodded. "You're the engineer."

Jon rubbed his chin again, then turned his chair to face the Governor. "Mr. John, the grapevine says we're touring the Tenth Quadrant because Karl Arnheim is running us out of the Ninth. How much truth is there to that?"

O'Hara looked down, then faced Jon. "A lot. For the past three years he's been buying up every little one-horse show he can get his hands on—even forcing some to sell. In another two or three years, A&BCE will probably have a complete monopoly of Ninth Quadrant star shows."

Jon frowned. "Not if we stuck around he wouldn't. We opened up the Quadrant for the star circuses, and some of the crew think we ought to stay in the Ninth and slug it out with Arnheim. We've whipped him every other time he's tried something."

The Governor chuckled. "Yes, we have." His face grew serious. "But I'm not in business to fight, Pirate; I'm in the entertainment business." He held a hand out toward the front view ports. "There's thousands of planets out there just itching to see their first circus, and neither of us will live long enough to play them all. The Universe is big enough for this show and the Abe Show. All we have to do is move over a little bit. The price of not moving over is higher than I want to pay."

A loud pop resounded throughout the bridge causing all heads to turn in the direction of the Boss Porter. Wall-eyed Mike held up the

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green bottle. "One minute to the Quadrant line." Wall-eyes turned and called to the bridge conference room.

Bald Willy stood up from the pilot's chair. "Everything on automatic, and let's do some damage to that jug of Wall-eyes'."

O'Hara clapped Jon on the shoulder, turned and went to the table. Jon studied the panel for a second, then flicked on the automatic alarm systems. He gave the panel a last look, then swung his chair around, stood and joined the others in the center of the bridge.

The bridge crew was joined by the non-bridge personnel from the conference room that the Governor had invited for the ceremony. Iron Jaw Jill, Sweetie Pie, and her mother. Duckfoot would be down cracking a keg with the roughnecks while Pony Red would be with the animal men in the menagerie. Kristina the lion lady, Madam Zelda, Pretzels the female contortionist, Fish Face. . . . Wall-eyed Mike held out a thin-stemmed lead-crystal glass filled with a bubbling, light golden liquid. When all of the persons on the bridge had gathered around the table and held glasses, the Governor looked at his watch for a few moments, then looked up. "That's it; we've crossed the line." He held up his glass. "To the season."

"To the season," they all repeated, then sipped from their glasses. As Jon swallowed, then raised his glass for a second sip, every alarm on his engineering panel began screaming.

His glass fell to the deck as he rushed back into his station chair and quickly scanned the instruments. He didn't need to look; he knew everyone on the bridge would be at their stations. He punched the comm for the pilot's station. "Willy, it's the pods. They're going out of match." Jon's fingers flew over the buttons. "I can't arrest it." He punched for the aft engineering section. "Animal!"

"This is Lefty, Pirate. Animal's up in the portside pod mount."

"Get them out of there! We're going to dump the pods!"

"What?"

"You heard me! Get them out of there. We don't have more than a couple of minutes!" Again Jon punched for the pilot. "Willy, I can only give you another two minutes of light drive, then we're going to have to dump the pods. You better get us headed to the nearest star and hope like Hell there's a habitable planet around it."

The Governor rushed to the pilot's station. "What about it, Willy?"

The pilot's fingers flew over the keyboard of his console. "The nearest star is . . . four light years . . . *no data*?" He looked up at O'Hara. "We're already off the major trade routes. If we go to this place, we'll never be found."

"What about the distress beacon?"

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Willy shook his head. "I already tried it. It won't jettison." He raised an eyebrow and looked at O'Hara. "It has to be sabotage."

O'Hara felt the color drain from his face. "Can we make it to a trade route?"

Willy shook his head. "We'd need light drive for at least eighteen minutes to make it to a trade route." Again he shook his head. "Still, if we head toward this star we'll be even further out of the way."

O'Hara scratched the back of his neck, then thrust his hands into his pockets. "Willy, if you're right about this being sabotage, we better do what we can about getting everyone off of this ship, and as soon as possible. Head for the star. Does it have a name?"

"No."

As Willy swung the ship to the right, the Governor walked over to the engineering section. "What about it, Jon?"

"Looks bad." He pointed at a readout. "Matching is already over critical. We heading for safe ground?"

"Yes. Willy said the nearest star is about four light years away."

Jon did some mental calculations. "Then if I can keep the pods on another two and a half minutes, we'll be within impulse range." He punched for the aft engineering section. "Lefty. Is Animal's crew out of the pod yet?"

"Lefty here, Pirate. Everybody but Animal is out. The rest of the crew is standing by to close up the port."

"Never mind about that. Get them out of there, and when Animal gets out, seal off the compartment."

"Right."

Jon studied the readouts, flicked switches, and sweated. "Nothing's slowing it down, Mr. John. It's like every safety interlock in the joint has been shorted out." He punched again for the aft engineering section. "Lefty, run up that pod mount and chase Animal's butt out of there! We're running out of time!"

"Pirate . . . wait! Here he comes now, and he's pulling someone with him!"

"I thought you said the rest of the crew was out of there."

"I did, and they are. This is someone else. Have to go and help Animal. I'll call back when we have the compartment sealed off."

Jon watched the mismatch readout climb from the orange into the red. He punched the comm for the pilot's station. "Willy . . . how close are we? I have to pull the plug pretty soon."

"Almost there, Pirate. About twenty-five billion kilometers—"

"Pirate, we're out and the compartment's sealed!"

Jon slammed his right palm against the emergency pod jettison

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panel and a loud slam shook the ship. A row of red lights blinked on Pirate's panel as the impulse attitude correction systems attempted to push the wallowing ship on course. "It's the dorsal rear docking port . . . the *Blitz* must have been sheared off." He flicked switches and the screen above his panel showed the half-crippled advance ship struggling to get under power. The starboard pod was nowhere to be seen, but the port pod revolved dangerously close to the craft. "C'mon, Stretch. Get that crate under pow—" The screen went white, then dead.

O'Hara shook Pirate's shoulder. "What's wrong with the screen? Why can't we get a picture?"

Pirate watched as a row of red lights blinked off, signaling the successful sealing of the dorsal port. "The receptors in the rear cameras . . . they're burned out from the flash."

"Stretch! What about Stretch?"

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Pirate shook his head. "Stretch, Fisty, Razor Red, and the others . . . they never knew what hit them." Pirate punched at his panel. "Dorsal engineering. Anybody there?"

"Here, Pirate. This is Nuts."

"Damage report."

"Except for a few bloody noses, we're all right. My board shows the *Blitz* missing."

Pirate closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them. "They've been exed." He punched again at the panel. "Willy, how close?"

"Twenty-three and a third billion . . . take us close to twenty-eight days on impulse. I hear right on the *Blitz*?"

"Yes." Pirate punched again. "Animal?"

"I'm here, Pirate. Been listening on the net."

"Animal, who's that guy you pulled out?"

"It's hard to tell. He's been burned pretty bad. He was caught in the pass/repass field up near the pod. Lefty's trying to see if he can find some identification . . . okay, here it is." Jon heard paper crackling. "I remember. He's an engineer we picked up when we were laying up on Palacine. His name's Stake Killing—funny name."

"Spell it."

"S-t-e-k-t K-y-l-l-i-n-g. Wait . . . there's more paper in here." Jon and the Governor heard a long, low whistle. "Pirate, you'll never guess who this guy is."

Jon reached out a hand toward the comm switch. "Karl Arnheim, right?"

"Right, but—" Jon Norden punched off the comm, then looked at O'Hara.

The Governor lowered his eyebrows a few notches. "How did you know it was Karl Arnheim?"

Jon leaned back in his chair. "Stekt Kylling. It's Norwegian for roast chicken." He shook his head. "And we always thought old Karl didn't have a sense of humor." He punched for aft engineering. "Animal, I want your crew to go over every rivet, nut, bolt, and connection in this ship, inside and out. There's no telling what else he buggered up, but you can count on it not being easy to find. Remember, he owned the outfit that built this ship." Pirate punched off, then looked at the Governor. O'Hara was staring at the dead screen, his eyes bright, a fist held to his mouth. He lowered his hand and looked at Pirate.

"Could he have died before he damaged anything else?"

"I doubt it, Mr. John. He knew enough to bypass our monitors and safety interlocks before throwing the pods into mismatch. He

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had to know he'd die if he remained in the pass/repass field more than ten seconds. I don't think he'd do that unless he was sure our number was up too."

O'Hara nodded, then rubbed his eyes. "I'll be off the bridge for a half hour or so, Pirate."

"Where will you be—in case we need you."

The Governor lowered his hand. "I'll be at the family quarters telling . . . well, telling them." He turned slowly and left the bridge.

Pirate punched in another code and the screen came to life with a display of the *Baraboo's* general schematic. "Somewhere in there old Karl has left a few more suprises for us."

FOURTEEN

Route Book, O'Hara's Greater Shows
15 April 2148.

Enroute to star system 9-1134. Fuel tanks for impulse and manuevering power ruptured. Still maintaining forward speed, relative to 9-1134, of 6000 kps, but will need both forward and maneuvering power for course corrections and to make orbit, always supposing there is something there to orbit. Oxygen regeneration system sabotaged, reducing capacity to twenty percent. Water recycler sabotaged, all outside communications are out . . . .

Bone Breaker Bob Naseby, the ship's surgeon, looked across Karl Arnheim's blackened corpse at the Governor. O'Hara was studying the body, his face a reflection of the many unanswered questions that tormented his mind. He looked up at the surgeon. "Bone Breaker, why did he do it? We're nothing compared to A&BCE, and he could have hired all the talent he needed to destroy this ship. He had everything. Why'd he do it?"

Bone Breaker looked back at the corpse. Why did he do it? "Some people believe themselves in control of things. Movers and shakers." The surgeon shrugged. "I think you shook his faith in that. He's had three years since that stunt he pulled on us back on Mystienya fell through to stew about it. There's that, and Karl Arnheim was a very sick man. The brain scan I did shows a tumor located on the frontal lobe."

"He was crazy?"

"Well . . . perhaps that might be one way of putting it. The tumor is small, but I'm certain that it contributed to his behavior." Bone

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Breaker looked at O'Hara. "If he had had medical treatment he could have had this fixed with a three-day stay in a hospital." He looked back at the corpse. "But first he would have to admit that something had control of him, then he would have had to find the three days."

O'Hara nodded and smiled. "Not Karl Arnheim. He would have given you his left leg before he'd give you a day of his time."

"Well, he's not in control any more."

O'Hara frowned. "Don't you bet on it. The air's already getting so thick you can taste it, and we still haven't figured out how to maneuver once we reach that star system—if we reach it." He nodded toward the corpse. "Karl's still running this show—for the time being, at least."

Jon Norden entered the sick bay, nodded at Bone Breaker, then turned toward O'Hara. "We have a problem. We've figured out how to rig the shuttle engines to operate from the bridge, which will give us at least some manueverability once we reach that star system. We've got a lot of lightening up to do for it to work. But about the air. Pony Red—"

O'Hara frowned. "No one in a circus is going to be understanding about killing off the animals. Especially not the Boss Animal Man."

Pirate Jon held out his hands. "I don't want to kill them, but do you realize how much air just one of the bulls uses? We won't last more than another two or three days running our air at twenty percent, and then the animals will be dead anyway. But, everyone else will be dead as well."

"What's Pony Red done?"

Jon lowered his hands. "He's sealed himself in the menagerie shuttle along with the led stock and exhibits. He threatens to cut loose if we try and force the docking port."

O'Hara cocked his head toward the door. "Let's go."

Pirate Jon followed the Governor out of the compartment into the main corridor leading to the portside shuttles. At the end of the corridor, O'Hara noticed three men standing at the sealed port to the menagerie shuttle. The Governor nodded at the three as he and Pirate Jon slowed to a stop before the port. Jon nodded at one of the men. "What's he say now, Goofy?"

Goofy shook his head. "He won't open up, and to tell you the truth, I don't blame him."

"Did you cut off the air?"

Goofy nodded. "He's running off of the shuttle's supply right now. With all the bulls and things in there he can't last more than two,

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three days."

One of the other men, Fatlip Louie, pulled at his namesake, then looked at Jon and O'Hara. "He's got respirators in there—special ones for the animals. I bet he could drag it out another day or two with them." Fatlip raised his eyebrows at the Governor. "Say . . . "

O'Hara grabbed Jon by the arm. "What about the shuttle air supplies and the respirators? Can we make it figuring those in?"

Pirate Jon pulled a computer from his belt and performed a series of calculations. He studied the results, pursed his lips, then repeated the series. He looked up at O'Hara. "Mr. John, according to my figures, using every possible air source and supply, including all of the respirators and vacuum suit supplies, and supposing that the regenerator on the ship remains operating at twenty percent capacity, and supposing that everyone takes it real easy the rest of the way, we might make it with nothing to spare." He shrugged. "Maybe."

O'Hara nodded, then turned to Goofy Joe. "Tell Pony Red his animals are off the hook."

Pirate Jon shook his head. "Mr. John, leaving the animals alive gives us no safety margin at all."

O'Hara nodded at Goofy Joe. "Tell him." He turned his head toward Jon. "Think about something, Jon. Why were the Bellenger pods buggered such that we had time to jettison them before they tore the ship apart? Not only that, but long enough to allow us to get within impulse range of that star system? Why did Karl Arnheim rig the air regeneration system to lose only eighty percent capacity? Why didn't he knock it out altogether?"

Jon shook his head. "What's your theory?"

"It's no secret that Karl would like to see this show destroyed." The Governor nodded. "I think it would appeal to Karl's sense of irony if he had us destroy ourselves." He turned and walked toward the bridge. As he left Jon and the others at the docking port, he turned his head and spoke over his shoulder. "We keep the animals, and everything else. Whatever else happens, this show survives!"

Route Book, O'Hara's Greater Shows
27 April 2148.

Enroute to star system 9-1134. Air stale, water short. Lightening of ship still in progress. Artifical gravity turned off to consume less oxygen . . .

In the main sleeping bay, Motor Mouth swallowed against the

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free fall, then pushed himself over to Electric Lips' bunk. The usually florid-faced spieler was a touch of green around the gills. He looked over at Motor Mouth floating beside his bunk and grimaced. "Put your feet on the deck, Motor Mouth."

"Why? There's not much point in free fall."

Electric Lips glowered at his colleague. "Put your damned feet on the deck! Keep floating around like that and I'll aim my first load of cookies at you!"

Motor Mouth pulled himself to the deck. "Bone Breaker's space-sick pills aren't helping?"

"If God meant man to be in space, He wouldn't have given us stomachs." Electric Lips shook his head. "I can't get any sleep. When I close my eyes it's just awful, and so I keep them open. I swear my eyeballs are getting dusty!"

Motor Mouth cocked his head toward the other end of the sleeping bay. "I have something to get your mind off of your belly. Unstrap and come with me."

"Unstrap? You, my gum-flapping friend, are ready for the white rubber lot. I'd sooner rip out my tongue!" The image created in Electric Lip's mind at his most recent comment deepened his green. "Leave me, Motor Mouth. Leave me die in what little peace I can muster."

"Get up, Lips. Quack Quack's pretty down about the advance being exed. We ought to cheer him up. Come on. It'll give you something to do besides think about—"

"Silence! Don't say it!" With feeble fingers Electric Lips began pulling at his strap buckles. "Lordy, what I wouldn't give to be in jail right now." He rose, and together they pulled their way to the end of the compartment. Near the bulkhead, jammed between a conduit and a locker, they found the press agent, Quack Quack. He was staring at the dark wall of the locker, lost in thought. Motor Mouth pushed off from a bunk, caught the handle of the locker, then pushed himself to the deck.

"Hi, Quack Quack."

Electric Lips gulped, pushed off from another bunk and caught the conduit, thereby swinging himself around until he slammed into the bulkhead. He bounced, and—still holding onto the pipe—he swung back toward the locker where Motor Mouth grabbed him by his coat tails, then pulled him to the deck. As Motor Mouth helped Lips jam himself between the end of a rack of bunks and the lockers, Quack Quack shook his head.

"You two ought to look into putting your trunks in Clown Alley."

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Electric Lips stopped his eyes from rolling, swallowed again, then aimed a sickly grin at the press agent. "You look a little down at the corners, Quack Quack. The Mouth and I decided to cheer you up . . . urp!"

The press agent shrugged. "I appreciate it, boys, but I guess I'm past cheering up. I should have been with Stretch and the boys on the advance. When the *Blitz* went . . . well, I'm just a little past it."

Motor Mouth frowned, then held out his free hand. "Lips and I have a disagreement. He says Buttons Fauglia pulled that Brighton number, but I say it was you."

Quack Quack turned to Lips. "Sorry, Lips, but that was mine."

Electric Lips frowned at Motor Mouth, then turned back to Quack Quack. "I guess I have it fuzzy. Maybe you could refresh my memory?"

The press agent looked back at the locker wall. "That was a few years ago, wasn't it? That was back before I was in politics, and before I worked for that publicity firm in Chicago. I was with the Bull Show out of Glasgow, and we were stuck in Brighton. I mean, we didn't have penny one to put in the fuse box. Governor Bullard was near ready to dissolve the show, since we'd only been up for three nights and near playing to ourselves. Bullard's used to do two, three weeks at a stand like they do over there.

"Anyway, the customers just weren't turning out. The Governor he comes to me and says that we have to get the gillies to the tent; either that, or it's in the cart. Well, I thought on it some. I'd passed out the usual readers to the local papers, but editors won't use releases from a circus mediagent unless they're really starved for copy. If you remember, that was about the time that Northern Ireland lit up again and finally became a part of the Republic. The papers were squawking about that something terrible and we could have burned down the show and not gotten a line in print."

Motor Mouth nodded. "Those are cold days, true. Had a few like that with the Old One in Peoria. What did you do?"

Quack Quack rubbed his chin. "Well, you know that the trick is to get free space in the papers without the editors knowing it. They're always on the prowl for stunts, and you have to be on sharp toes to keep ahead of them. Well, I had a talk with Split Straw O' Toole. He was a trick shooter we had that was watering bulls while we were in England. About then the folks in Old Blight wouldn't have been too keen on us billing any shooter named O' Toole, if you know what I mean.

"O'Toole had kin up there in Ireland, and he called to make a

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plant. That afternoon the constabulary up there happened upon a plan to raid Brighton and ex the Bull Show. Seems that the IRA was accusing us of being spies, and that justice needed doing. Now, it didn't matter that it had been four years since the Bull Show had toured Ireland. No one saw that, or even looked for it. The first thing was a screaming editorial in a Brighton paper that came out along with the story. Then, Governor Bullard had a press conference where he spat defiance at the blackguards who would attack a harmless show.

"Well, before you know it, the local citizenry turned out to show their support, but after a few speeches were made in Parliament, we had a couple of regiments standing guard on us, and buying tickets, too." Quack Quack shook his head. "From there on the tenting season was making coin. The story went in front of us and grew by the mile, allowing each local editor to vent spleen on his favorite patriotic subject. Next season we toured the Republic and just turned the story around a little, and the same thing when we toured the north. In the north, the IRA was after us, or the British depending on the town; in the Republic it was the Ulstermen after us, then back to the Old Blight with the IRA hot on our heels. We milked that stunt for three seasons until those papers finally realized just whose flag it was they were waving."

Motor Mouth cocked his head to one side. "Quack Quack, those shows over there; they call it tenting instead of touring or trouping, don't they?"

"Yes. I always liked what they called jobs over there. Tent Master is what they called the Boss Canvasman. And, do you know what they call canvasmen?"

Electric Lips shook his head. "What do they call them?

"Czechs."

Motor Mouth frowned. "You mean like what you write out for money?"

"No. There was a town in a country called Czechoslovakia that did nothing but supply canvasmen to the European shows. So, they called them Czechs." The press agent turned toward Lips. "What are you studying on?"

Lips looked up smiling, his stomach forgotten along with Quack Quack's misery. "I heard you use a phrase that I've heard the Governor use every now and then. In the cart."

Quack Quack nodded. "In trouble. The shows over there use it."

"Wonder how that came to mean being in trouble?"

The press agent pursed his lips. "I think it comes from the days

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of the Black Plague. They used to move carts through the streets to haul away the . . . dead." He returned his glance to the locker. "They'd call out 'Bring out the dead!' and then you'd haul your wife, your father, or whoever had died during the night . . . so when you're in the cart . . . "

Motor Mouth turned to Electric Lips. "That was terrific, Lips. I might even say inspired."

Lips frowned. "I'm sorry." Lips saw Motor Mouth going green. "Mouth, what's the matter?"

"Get me . . . a . . . bag!"

At the other end of the main bay, Weasel, the holder of the juice joint privilege, lay strapped in his bunk, licking his dry lips, and dreaming of enormous lakes of cool, clear water. He felt a hand shake his shoulder, the lakes disappeared, and he opened his eyes at a frown. Looking back was Wall-eyes Mike Ikona, the Boss Porter. "What'n the hell'd you do that for, Wall-eyes?"

Wall-Eyes held out a plastic squeeze bottle filled with a pink liquid. "Here. It's to drink."

Weasel raised an eyebrow. "Forget it. That stuff looks too much like pink lemonade."

"It is. We found five hundred gallons of it frozen in the ship's freezer."

Weasel shook his head. "I sell it; I don't *drink* it!"

"You better. There's not much else until they get the condenser rigged."

Weasel stared at the plastic bottle. "Why's it in a ketchup bottle?"

"You rather chase the stuff around the bay? C'mon, we got these from the grab joint supplies; they've never been used."

Weasel took the bottle, stared at it for a long moment, then inserted the nozzle into his mouth, making a face. He gave the bottle a squeeze, then removed it as he swallowed. His eyebrows went up and he smacked his lips. "Hey, that's not bad!"

Wall-eyes smiled. "You make a good product, Weasel. We're melting the stuff down in the pressure cookers, but we couldn't find your property lemon, so no floaters."

Weasel sipped again at the bottle, then shrugged. "What the hell, Wall-Eyes." He reached under his pillow and pulled out a bright, yellow lemon. "This was supposed to last me the season, but, what the hell—let's splurge."

Pirate Jon adjusted his pressure suit as he pulled his way toward

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the number ten shuttle. As he approached the docking port, he saw a small crowd of roughnecks gathered there. They stood silently, heads hung down. Pirate Jon stopped, noticed the red light on the lock cycle, then turned to the nearest canvasman. "Carrot Nose, why's number ten under vacuum?"

"The crew's out there dumping the main top." Carrot Nose snorted. "You ordered it."

Pirate Jon frowned. "I know, but they were supposed to wait for me. Who's bossing the cargo gang?" The faces gathered around the port grew noticeably longer. "Goofy?"

Goofy Joe rubbed his hand under his nose and sniffed. "Duckfoot."

"The Boss Canvasman? He doesn't know the first thing about moving cargo in free fall. He's not even suit trained."

Fatlip Louie gave a bitter chuckle. "The Boss Canvasman says if anybody's going to dump the old rag, it's going to be him. I wasn't going to argue with him."

Pirate Jon moved to the lock cycle. The shuttle side was open. He pressed the button to close the shuttle port, but the red light remained on. He turned to Goofy. "He's jammed the shuttle port open."

"Duckfoot don't want any interference. You got to understand, Pirate, that to Duckfoot, that old rag is as much a part of his family as Sweetie Pie or the Queen."

"We have to dump it boys, and everything else that we can. With the tops, sticks, rigging, blues, spool wagons, cats, and everything else in those shuttle gone, that'll be eight-hundred-plus tons less that the engines have to push against to make course corrections. . . ." He looked around at the faces. "There's something else. What is it?"

Fatlip shrugged, then shook his head. "Duckfoot, he looked awful different when he went in there." He looked at Pirate. "With the back doors of that shuttle open, and the old rag sailing off behind to who knows where . . ." Fatlip shook his head. Goofy Joe placed a hand on Fatlip's shoulder and looked at Pirate.

"Fatlip was going to say that it wouldn't take much for Duckfoot to jump out after the old rag, just to keep it company."

Pirate bit his lip as he smacked the lock cycle in frustration, then he pushed away. "I can't hang around here; there are other shuttles to be unloaded." As he made his way down the corridor, he saw Diane and Sweetie Pie heading in the opposite direction. He pulled up short as they stopped next to him. Sweetie Pie's eyes were red. Pirate looked at Diane. "You heard?"

"Yes."

Pirate hung his head and averted his glance. "Maybe it'll be all

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right . . . I'm sorry."

Diane reached out a hand and placed it on Pirate's arm. "It's not your fault. Duckfoot has to do what he has to do." Diane looked down the corridor. "We ought to be waiting by the port." She released his arm, then the pair moved toward the number ten shuttle.

Pirate Jon pushed into a cross-corridor, then at the center of the ship he took another cross and moved to the dorsal passageway. As he reached the number one shuttle port, he found Warts, the route book man, waiting. The bumpy Pendiian turned his head in Pirate's direction. "Ah, I have found you."

"So?" Pirate pulled himself to a stop.

"The Governor sent me to tell you that the cally-ope stays. Everything else on the flying squadron can go, but the horse piano stays."

"That thing weighs almost four tons!"

The Pendiian shrugged. "I only bear the bad news, Pirate. I didn't devise it." Warts lowered his voice. "As far as I am concerned, the horse piano should be the *first* thing to go."

Pirate frowned. "Are you crazy? You have a vacuum inside that lumpy skull? Ditch the cally-ope?"

Warts shrugged, then pushed off. "Tender ears and an unfortunately refined taste in music are my only excuses."

Pirate turned into the open port, and amidst the forest of lashed wagons, cookhouse, and kid show equipment, Dr. Weems sat at his calliope, fingering the keys to a silent song. The Doctor looked up as Pirate approached. "I was just saying goodbye, Pirate. I've played many a ditty on these pipes."

"Well, say hello again. Mr. John says that it doesn't get dumped."

Dr. Weems' eyes grew wide. "The truth!? Tell me, Pirate, do you speak the truth?"

Pirate nodded, then sighed. "But that's four tons I'm going to have to carve out of something else."

Weems clapped his hands together, then scratched his chin. "Pirate, you know you could lighten this thing up a bit if you drained the water out of the boiler."

"Water? That's right! How much is in there?"

"A hundred and twenty gallons . . . . why?"

"Why didn't you say something? You know how short of water we are."

Weems shrugged. "I never thought of it for drinking. That stuff's pretty nasty. It's an iron boiler, you know."

"We can clean it up. A hundred and twenty gallons—that's another day on the company's ticket! More!"

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The intercom signal sounded, and Pirate pushed his way to the docking port. He pressed the switch as he came to rest. "Pirate in number one."

"Pirate, this is Goofy outside of number ten. They're closing up the shuttle doors. Thought you'd want to know."

Pirate switched off and pushed his way into the corridor. In moments he found himself pulling up to the number ten docking port. The lock was cycling, and as he came to rest, the hatch opened and a huge suited figure emerged. The ugly, unhelmeted head was Duckfoot's. Sweetie Pie pushed off and wrapped herself around the Boss Canvasman. "Hey!" He looked around at the grinning faces. "What's this?"

Diane moved next to Duckfoot and planted a kiss on his cheek. "This is just a welcoming party."

Duckfoot raised his eyebrows, then lowered them into the darkest of glowers. "You . . . you punks thought I was going to . . . *jump*? You think a show's nothing to me but a few yards of cloth?" He pushed away from the port, scattering his welcoming committee into the bulkheads. Sweetie Pie hung on and Diane kept up. She looked into Duckfoot's face and saw the tears. They entered the cross corridor toward the family quarters. He pulled up in the center of the cross corridor, placed one arm around Sweetie Pie and the other around Diane. "I swear it. I swear I saw the old rag wave goodbye."

Jingles McGurk looked with disgust at his empty office. All of his furniture had been unbolted and tossed out along with his carefully kept ledgers, records, readers, and computer terminal. One thing remained to be removed—the shoulder-high safe bolted to the deck in the corner of the compartment. One and a half tons, it had to go. But first, Jingles had to open it to allow the cargo crew to cut the bolts from the inside.

Jingles pushed away from the bulkhead and came to rest against the brightly decorated safe door. He sighed, placed his left palm against the sensor plate, then punched in the combination with his right forefinger. A whirr, a click, then Jingles pulled open the door. Banded sheafs of credit notes and bags of coin floated weightless inside. He reached inside, pulled forth a pack of bills, then smiled as he broke the band and pushed the bills into the air. Pack after pack, he pulled them from the safe, broke the bands, then threw them into the air where they hung, drifting lazily in the air currents. After loosing the bills, Jingles opened the coin bags and emptied them by swinging the bags around his head. The safe empty, Jingles

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looked at the compartment, the air filled with bills and whirling coins. The treasurer smiled, pushed off from the deck, and somersaulted into the center of it.

"Wheeeee!"

FIFTEEN

Route Book, O'Hara's Greater Shows
1 May 2148.

Enroute to star system 9-1134. Seven days to the star itself. Four planets can be easily seen, with three of them having orbits close enough to the star to make them uninhabitable. First course correction using the shuttle engines a total failure. Lisa "Bubbles" Raeder passed away. Kid show crew held services prior to her burial at space. Waldo Screener, The Ossified Man, has not been located after several intense searches, and is presumed to have joined his wife . . .

Jon Norden tightened the last nut on the fuel connection, then rolled over onto the deck. "That's it."

"We hope."

Pirate Jon raised his head and looked at the Animal, sitting on the deck, his back against the bulkhead. Jon sat up and pulled himself across the deck until he leaned against the bulkhead next to his second engineering officer. "Animal, are you thinking about how we're going to have to hold this thing in orbit until the shuttles get free?"

Animal shook his head. "No. There's a lot of ways to die, and this one has to beat rotting away in bed as an old man."

Jon closed his eyes and leaned his head back. The thick air made his lungs gurgle slightly. "What then?"

"Look, Pirate. When we make orbit and everyone gets off on the shuttles except for the skeleton crew, air won't be a problem anymore—neither will water."

"So?"

"That'll give the crew time enough to repair the deep space communications—maybe even the emergency signal beacon. Anyway, we should be able to call for help after a few days."

Jon nodded. "That's what we're hoping. We can do it if we can get these shuttle engines to work together making a good orbit."

"I've been thinking—or trying to think—the way old Karl would.

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There's not another star system within fifty light years of this one, and I'll bet you anything this one has a habitable planet."

"Why?"

"I think Karl wants to maroon the show. Allow the show to make it down alive, then just let the circus piddle away. How long would it take for a bunch of people trying to survive to forget all about circuses?"

Jon shook his head. "If we get things working again we won't need to answer that."

Animal coughed, then nodded. "That's the way I think old Karl figured it too. You can't maroon someone if he can still yell for help."

Jon opened his eyes and looked at Animal. "You think Karl has another trick up his sleeve for us?"

Animal nodded, then let his head ease back against the bulkhead. "That's what I think."

"We've checked out practically every circuit, nut, bolt, and spring. What's left? What could we have overlooked?"

"I don't know." He shook his head. "I just don't know. We've run checks on everything possible . . . "

Jon frowned. "What is it?"

Animal moved his head forward. "The equipment we've been doing the checks with. Karl had enough smarts to bugger up your monitor so you wouldn't know what was going on until the pods had to be blown. What if he did the same to the other monitor and test equipment?"

"How can we check that out? Karl knew enough to reseal the engineering monitoring access doors."

Animal shrugged. "So, we unseal everything and go over it until we find something."

Jon closed his eyes, took a deep breath of the stale air, then pushed himself to his feet. "Let's get started."

Pony Red Miira returned from the number three shuttle's bull bay and shook his head as he sat down next to Waxy and Snaggletooth. "I know they kept the gravity on in the menagerie shuttle to keep from panicking the animals, but I wonder if it might be better to turn it off."

Snaggletooth shook his head. "They couldn't take it, Pony. At least they're quiet."

Waxy looked over at Pony. "How's Lolita?"

"The air's getting her. She's on the juice right now, but I'm afraid she'll suffocate if she lies down."

Waxy shrugged. "Take her off the juice, and she'll kick out the

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sides of the shuttle. The Governor know?"

Pony shook his head. "Mr. John's got enough on his mind. Snaggletooth, what about the cats?"

Snaggletooth shook his head. "All of them, the ones left, have got the wheezes. I don't figure them to last more'n two, three days."

They all looked up to see Kristina The Lion Lady enter the menagerie shuttle. She smiled at the three. "Almost seems odd to be under gravity." She cocked her head toward the back of the shuttle. "Pony, I'm going back to see my kids."

"Sure."

The three waited in embarrassed silence until Kristina had made the turn and had disappeared between the lashed down cage wagons. Waxy rubbed his nose, then leaned back against a straw bale. "Kris grew up with them cats. Her momma used to make them dance the hoops, remember?"

Snaggletooth nodded. "Sure. I remember when Momma Kris's old man got clawed. What was his name?"

Pony frowned. "Charlie. Wasn't with us long, was he?"

Snaggletooth shook his head. "Those cats're gonna die, Pony. Kris won't take it easy."

Pony raised his eyebrows and nodded. "At least the horses and most of the bulls are holding up. Too bad about the apes—" Seven shots in quick succession deafened the three animal men, startling the animals into howls, roars, and screams. Before the three had made it to their feet, an eighth shot slammed against their eardrums. Pony rushed between the cage wagons, saw Kristina crumpled on the deck, then stopped as he saw the lions in their two cage wagons, limp and dead. He stooped over, turned Kristina over on her back, then noted the eight-shot Kaeber in her hand, and the tiny hole in her right temple.

Grabbit Kuumic, Boss Property Man, held the bulb box in his hands and frowned at Waco Whacko. "I dunno, Waco. We're supposed to dump all this stuff to lighten the ship."

Waco stared at the Boss Property Man with dark-circled brown eyes. "I don't want the bulbs, Grabbit; just the box."

"Well, what do you need it for?"

Waco's hands shot out and grabbed the box, pulling it out of Grabbit's grasp. "You want to know?" He opened the box, removed the six main lighting array bulbs, and let them float in the air. "If you want to know, come with me!" Grabbit turned and followed the snake charmer into the main center corridor toward the family quarters. Waco pulled himself into one of the doors lining the corridor.

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Grabbit stopped at the door and looked into the compartment. Strapped down on four cots, five to a cot, were Waco's twenty snakes from Ssendiss. They all looked asleep. Waco went to one of the cots and stroked one of the snakes. "Hassih, I have the box."

The snake opened its eyes, emitted a hiss, then closed them. Waco hung his head, then opened the box. He reached into the coil of one of the snakes, withdrew an egg, placed it into one of the box's compartments, then moved on to another snake. Grabbit frowned. "What it is, Waco? Are they all right?"

"They're dead . . . all of them, now. It's the air."

Grabbit shook his head. "I'm sorry, Waco. What about the eggs? Is there something I can do?"

"No." Waco went to another snake and withdrew another egg from deep in the reptile's coil. "All I needed was the box. I can't have those eggs floating around in here; they'll get damaged."

"What'll you do with them, Waco? How long do they take to hatch?"

Waco placed another egg into the box. There were five of them, fist-sized and bright blue. He closed the box and held it with both hands. "The way we reckon time, Grabbit, these eggs will take close to two hundred and seventy years to hatch. Whatever happens, I have to see that they get taken care of. I promised them." He turned his head toward the dead snakes.

Grabbit shook his head. "Waco, you'll be long gone by then. Who's to take care of them when you're in the big lot?"

"My sons and daughters, and their sons and daughters."

"You married?"

"Not yet. But I will be." He turned toward the dead snakes, closed his eyes, and shook his head. "I promise these eggs will hatch, Hassih, Sstiss, Nissa . . . all of you. You won't be forgotton."

Grabbit pulled his way out of the doorway and left the snake charmer alone.

SIXTEEN

Route Book, O'Hara's Greater Shows
2 May 2148.

Enroute to star system 9-1134. Six days to go. Artificial-gravity power-supply has been rigged to crack water, releasing oxygen. This has helped the breathing some, but leaves us even shorter on water . . .

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Peru Abner Bolin looked up from his bunk to see the Clown Alley gang gathered around. He turned to Cholly. "What is this, Cholly? A wake?"

"Peru, maybe we can get the gravity turned on in here, or at least we can move you to the menagerie shuttle—"

"No, no. Boys, the breathing's a lot easier without the gravity."

"Can't Bone Breaker do anything?"

Peru Abner slowly shook his head. "What's ailing me, Cholly, is something only a time machine could fix. Bone Breaker's all out of 'em." The old clown closed his eyes, then turned his head toward Cholly. "That Mutt and Jeff routine Ahssiel and I did . . . wasn't that a corker?"

Cholly nodded. "I wish the little plug was here right now." Peru Abner frowned. "I don't mean in this fix, Peru. But he'd want to be here with you."

"The boy's a prince, Cholly. He's got responsibilities." Peru Abner smiled. "Bet he'll make a dandy Monarch when his time comes. Can't you see him holding court dressed in motley?"

Cholly shook his head. "You were a pair, all right." He ducked as Stenny missed a handhold and went careening into a bulkhead. Peru Abner reached out a hand and shook Cholly's arm.

"It's too bad you can't do your number in free fall, Cholly. It'd be a sidesplitter."

Cholly raised his brows and smiled. "Peru, you never liked my act. You neat clowns never did go for tramps."

Peru Abner turned down the corners of his mouth and shook his head. "Jealous, that's all. The customers laugh at my stuff—my sophisticated stuff—but those belly laughs you got, Cholly; boy, did I envy those." The old clown flew into a coughing spasm, then quieted down as his eyelids grew very heavy. "I always liked your act, Cholly. I'd like to see it again."

Cholly shook his head. "I don't feel very funny."

Peru Abner reached out a hand and grasped Cholly's arm. "What we do is art! For fun we play cards, cut up jackpots, get drunk. When we perform, that . . . that's for the soul. Perform for me, Cholly." He raised his eyes to the rest of the Joeys gathered around his bunk. "All of you. I want to see all of you. Go on. Make fools of yourselves."

Cholly paused for a moment, then, with neither gravity nor makeup, he pushed away from the bunk, steadied himself in midair between two upper bunks, then began his poor soul act, depicting the tramp that never succeeds but has an everlasting flame of hope in his threadbare soul. The other Joeys went into their pratfalls and

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comic dramas, and in seconds the entire performance was chaos mixed with gales of laughter as clown after clown collided with either bunk, co-worker, or bulkhead. Cholly tried, but he could not maintain the deadpan expression that had become his trademark. He laughed until the laughter brought tears to his eyes, then he steadied himself and pushed toward Peru's bunk. He caught the railing, then shook his head. "Damn, Peru, can we get free fall planetside? This is great! If they have artificial gravity, maybe we can figure out an artificial free fall for the breakout . . . " Cholly looked at Peru's face, eyes still open, his face relaxed, but smiling. "Peru?" He shook Peru's arm. The great clown had died.

Route Book, O'Hara's Greater Shows
3 May 2148.

Enroute to 9-1134's fourth planet. Second attempt at course correction successful, but leaving shuttle fuel low. We should intercept the nameless planet on the 8th. A name-the-planet contest is being conducted to raise spirits. The Governor suggested "Momus" after the ancient Earth god of ridicule. One of the bulls, Lolita, died under tranquilization. The Governor's health is failing as well . . . .

Warts Tho looked up from writing in the route book and glanced around the bridge at the crew manning the stations. Pirate Jon, strapped into his chair, was asleep, his head back. Bald Willy hung over his console, his only movement being a chest heaving for air. Since the communications bank was dead, the chair before it was empty. The Pendiian shook his head and looked at the screen above Pirate Jon's station. The tiny planet had grown noticeably larger. The blue-white orb had small polar ice caps, large land masses, and small oceans. Water covered only fifty percent of the surface. It would be a dry place, but habitable. The planet had no moons—not even one.

Warts closed the route book and stuck his pen in his jacket pocket, entertaining thoughts of the foolish sailor who went down with his ship while completing the ship's log. He unbuckled himself from his chair, tucked the route book under his arm, then pushed toward the bridge's entrance. He took a last look at the screen and was startled to see that a pile of twisted wreckage was crossing the *Baraboo*'s path. "Pirate!" Warts pushed himself to the Chief Engineer's station and slapped Pirate's back. "Pirate! Wake up!" He turned to the pilot and shouted to the pilot. "Bald Willy! Do you see that ahead?"

Bald Willy looked around at Warts, then looked up at the screen.

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He turned back and punched in a code to illuminate his own screen. Pirate looked up, rubbed his eyes, then looked again. "I'll be a bull's backside. It's the *Blitz.*" Sparks came from part of the wreckage. "Willy, it's under power! See the attitude correction jets?"

"Got you, Pirate." Willy punched at his console, then shouted into it. "Marbles, where are you?"

Pirate cut in. "Willy, the radios are still out."

"Yeah, but Marbles can read code. See that flashing light in the middle of that mess—just forward of the dorsal shuttle?"

Pirate squinted at his screen. "Yeah . . . I can just make it out. That looks like code, too." He shook his head. "How'd Stretch ever push that nightmare this far? When the pods went, they must have blown him quite a distance."

Warts waited until Marbles Mann, the ship's Chief of Communications, came on the bridge. He pulled himself over to Bald Willy's side. "What's up?"

Bald Willy nodded at his screen. "See that flashing light?"

"Yes. It's code . . . *Baraboo* . . . answer . . . wake up . . . hey rube . . . " Marbles looked at Bald Willy's console. "Where's the button for the forward docking lights?" Willy pointed to one of a row of square, orange buttons. Marbles talked as he stabbed at the button. "Jerkface . . . is . . . that . . . you?"

The flashing from the *Blitz* ceased for a moment, then resumed. "Marbles . . . you . . . pick . . . great . . . times . . . to . . . sleep."

"What . . . is . . . your . . . condition?"

"How . . . do . . . we . . . look . . . stop . . . plenty . . . broken . . . bones . . . stop . . . no . . . one . . . dead . . . stop . . . all . . . in . . . sleeping . . . bay . . . for . . . party . . . when . . . it . . . hit . . . the . . . fan."

Warts pushed away from Pirate's chair and headed toward the Governor's quarters.

The Governor's door hissed open and Warts stuck in his head. The compartment was dark. "Mr. John? Mr. John?"

"Who . . . who's that?" The voice was very small and weak.

"It's me, Mr. John, Warts." He pushed into the compartment. "It's Stretch, Mr. John. The *Blitz* is back!"

"Say it . . . say it again, Warts."

Warts pulled up to the Governor's bed and turned on the small reading lamp. The Governor's face was chalk white, thin, with large circles under half-closed eyes. He was straining against his straps. "The *Blitz*. Stretch and the advance are back."

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"How many dead, Warts?"

"None!"

O'Hara relaxed and let his head go back onto the cot. "That's . . . good news." He closed his eyes and nodded. "Can the *Blitz* make light speed?" He looked at Warts. "What about it, and its communications? Can it transmit on deep space?"

Warts placed a lumpy hand on the Governor's arm. "Willy's finding out about that now."

O'Hara gasped, then coughed. When his lungs quieted down, he turned his head toward the Pendiian. "Warts?"

"Yes, Mr. John?"

"Thank you . . . thank you for coming to tell me."

"I thought you'd want to know right away."

"How does the *Blitz* look?"

Warts shook his head. "Looks pretty banged up. I didn't even recognize it when I saw it."

O'Hara frowned, then nodded. "You been keeping up with the route book?"

"Yes."

The Governor closed his eyes. "How long have you been with the show, Warts?"

"This is my fifth season—well, it would have been—"

"It still will be."

Warts shook his head. "I don't understand."

O'Hara sighed, then coughed. Quiet again, his breath came in short gasps. "I don't think . . . we're getting out of this one, Warts. Maybe the crew can keep the ship in orbit . . . maybe they can fix the beacon. Now that the *Blitz* is back, maybe . . . maybe our chances are better." He shook his head as he coughed. "If we get stuck on that planet, the show is in for the toughest season it ever saw. No audience . . . hard work, scrabbling to survive. It'll die, Warts. The show . . . the *circus*!" O'Hara looked about, his eyes darting back and forth in their sockets. "Warts? Warts?"

Warts squeezed the Governor's arm. "I'm right here, Mr. John."

O'Hara relaxed a bit. "We've got O'Hara's Greater Shows on board this rocket to Hell . . . the circus. The best of all the circuses . . . that ever existed." O'Hara's head rocked back and forth. " . . . the circus'll just fade . . . away. . . ."

"Mr. John?" Getting no answer, Warts leaned over the Governor and shook his shoulders. "Mr. Jo—"

The Governor's right hand shot out and grabbed Warts by the back of his neck, then a strong arm pulled the Pendiian's head next

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to O'Hara's lips. "Warts . . . never . . . never let these people forget who they are. Never . . . let them forget. . . . "

The hand relaxed, then the arm went limp and floated in the air. The Pendiian stared at the Governor for a long moment. Then Warts pushed away from the bed and came to rest against the Governor's desk. He turned on the light then and looked for the route book. He found it hovering at the foot of the Governor's bed. He retrieved it, moved back to the desk, then opened it.

3 May 2148.

Enroute to Momus. *Blitz* has returned with all hands. John J. O'Hara has passed away.

AFTERSHOW

Horth Shimsiv, Ninth Quadrant Admiralty Officer, Investigations Division, turned the last sheet of the huge, hand-bound volume, then looked up at the young human dressed in black and white diamond patterned robe. "Well, what happened then?"

The young fellow roused himself from a doze, rubbed his eyes, then stood and joined the officer on the other side of the adobe shack. "What was your question?" He held out his hand.

The officer frowned and reached into his pocket for some of the little copper things they used for money on Momus. Taking several, he dropped them into the fellow's hand. "What happened after this? I'm here to investigate the actual accident."

The young fellow walked to a rough plank shelf containing several similar volumes and pulled one down. He turned and placed it before the officer. "What you read was the *Book of Baraboo*. You said you wanted to know about the ship. This volume is the first *Book of Momus*. I think it tells about the landing."

The office frowned. "You don't know?"

The young man blushed. "I'm but an apprentice priest, Officer Shimsiv. Perhaps you would like to speak to the Boss Priest of our order, Great Warts."

"Warts?"

The young man nodded. "He is the last living member of the company that flew on the *Baraboo*. Please, come this way." He turned and walked to the back of the room and halted next to a black and white diamond patterned curtain. Horth Shimsiv pushed his bulk to his feet, relaxed his tail, and straightened his uniform

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as he approached the door and came to a halt next to the apprentice priest. The young man lifted the curtain and stuck in his head. "Great Warts?"

"What is it, Badnews?" The voice was high-pitched and cracked.

"The officer from the Admiralty Office wishes to speak to you."

"Send him in; send him in."

Horth followed the apprentice into a small, dark room. In the back of the room sat a tiny Pendiian dressed in the familiar black and white diamonds. Before the old priest's comfortable wicker chair was a low table upon which were three cards: two jacks and an ace of hearts. "I've read the first book, Mr. Warts, but I still haven't learned what I need to about the actual crash."

The Pendiian leaned back in his chair, and held out his hand. Horth glowered, then dropped some coppers into it. "Well, thank you officer . . . ?"

"Horth Shimsiv."

"Yes. Sit. Sit."

Horth found a rude wooden stool before the table and seated himself. "What about the crash?"

Warts nodded. "A sad day and a proud day."

"Meaning?"

The Boss Priest flipped over the three cards, then moved them around. When he stopped, he left them in a straight line, then looked at Horth. "Care to buy a chance on finding the ace?"

Horth frowned. "No thank you. What about the crash?"

Warts sighed. "Well, you know the *Baraboo* made orbit?"

"The book didn't say, but I assumed something of the sort."

Warts nodded. "Well, when the shuttles were loaded and on their way to the surface, the crew on the *Baraboo* must have found out whatever Karl Arnheim's last surprise was. As soon as we left, Pirate Jon was going to try and put the ship into a permanent orbit with the computers. The surprise must have been in there, because the ship dove and burned in the atmosphere before the first shuttle touched down." The Pendiian looked down and shook his head.

"What then?"

Warts looked up, collected his thoughts, then nodded. "Well, the shuttles hardly had any fuel. We couldn't do any fancy formation flying, so we went down when and as we could. Four of the shuttles did land together near here next to Tarzak. Four of them landed in different places up north, a couple landed west of here, and one went clear across the water to the next continent." The Pendiian shook his head. "Took us three years to get back together again. The

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parades started looking good after that."

"Parades?"

Warts raised his brows, then laughed. "Parades. Why, twenty minutes after our first shuttles touched down, we made formation and went on parade." He leaned forward as though he were explaining something to a mentally arrested child. "That's what O'Hara's always does after it makes a stand." He leaned back and smiled. "The service—the parade—the next year was better. We had a road cut to Miira by then, so we had the rubber mules—elephants—in

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the formation."

Horth shook his scaled head, then frowned at the Boss Priest. "I've seen cultures orient themselves around numerous things—making religions out of them. But . . . they were survival things with laws concerning food, sex, social organization. But, a *circus?* I've looked around this town a little, and everyone is either a clown, an acrobat, a magician, or something else. Keeping up these skills and passing them on, in addition to trying to feed, clothe, and shelter yourselves these past fifty years, must have wrought terrible hardships upon you. Why? Why did you do it? A circus, of all things. Why?"

Warts rubbed the bumps on his chin. "I thought you said you read the first book."

"I did. Still, I don't understand."

Warts studied the officer for a few moments, then shrugged. "It's a disease."

Horth sighed, then got to his feet. "Well, thank you, Mr. Warts. If I need more information we'll be sending someone down." The officer bowed, turned, then left the room.

Badnews held up his hand. "Great War—"

"Shhh!" Warts waited a few moments until he could hear Horth's footsteps on the gravel path outside. "Now, my boy; what was it?"

Badnews frowned. "I've never seen one before, Great Warts, although I've read of them in the Books. Was that a rube?"

Warts rubbed his bumps, then nodded. "Yes, my boy, that was a rube." The old Pendiian pushed up the sleeves to his robe and flexed his fingers. He gathered up his three cards and put them down, face up. "And, there's a whole shipload of them up there. Pardon me while I brush a little rust off of my game."

Probe In Outerspace, Nearly Extrasolar, Elicits Response

The Pioneer probes will enlighten,
Inform, and in general brighten
The evening's TV
Astronomically,
Notwithstanding the silence of Titan.

—John M. Ford

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SOLUTION TO VACATION ON THE MOON (from page 38)

1. Rocket ships are in "free fall" as soon as they leave the Earth. From the time the motors are turned off to the time they are used again for altering course or braking, there is zero *g* inside a rocket ship. The mistake about this in the narrative was one that Jules Verne made in his classic *Trip from the Earth to the Moon.*

2. Cigars won't stay lit in zero gravity unless you constantly wave them about. Gasses produced by the burning of tobacco must be carried upward by the buoyancy of air, in turn caused by gravity pulling air down.

3. Birds can't fly on the Moon because there is no air against which their wings can push or support them when gliding.

4. No air, no breezes, no rippling flags on the Moon.

5. Although in daytime the lunar sky is indeed dark, there is so much reflected light from the Moon's surface that stars are not visible to unaided eyes. They *can* be seen through binoculars.

6. Even at night, stars on the Moon never twinkle. Twinkling on earth is caused by movements of the atmosphere.

7. For stars to be visible inside the arms of a crescent Earth they would have to be between Earth and the Moon.

8. The Moon does rotate once during each revolution around the Earth, but since it always keeps its same face toward the Earth, the Earth does not rise and set. From any given location on the Earth side of the Moon, the Earth remains fixed in the sky.

9. Without air a boomerang can no more operate on the Moon than a bird can keep itself aloft.

10. Twitchell couldn't have heard the boomerang strike the boulder because sound requires an atmosphere to transmit its waves.

11. Before the first Moon landing it was widely thought that objects would be invisible in moon shadows. Actually, so much light is reflected from the irregular lunar surface that this is not the case.

12. Although the sun does rise and set on the Moon, it takes it about 28 days to return to a former position. It could not have set as rapidly as the narrative indicates.

13. The terminator moves at about 10 miles per hour. This is slow enough for a person to keep pace with its movement.

14. As in mistake 12, the Sun could not have risen until some two weeks after it set.

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LETTERS

Dr. Asimov:

Who did the little illustrations that are placed at the end of the stories to fill up what would otherwise be blank space?

Will Briggs
Milan GA

The one inch square ones were drawn by Don Simpson; the rest by Alex Schomburg.

—George H. Scithers

Dear Joel, George, Shawna, and "good Dr." Isaac:

This is my first mash letter to a publication, and I find myself in that proverbial quandary! Before I continue, I should tell you (or *confess* on bended knee with much humble posturing) that I have always disliked science fiction! The language, terms and format were totally beyond me, even though I was an English major and fairly widely read.

But 6 years ago I married a man who was avid (not to say addicted . . .) reader of all forms of science fiction. Since I am a writer (as yet unpublished) of historical/romantic fiction and a reader of all other forms of fiction, I was compelled by love (and a nagging husband) to widen my horizons to include sci fi. [SF, please!] I was fortunate to start with some of the "good Doctor's" works of art. OH Joy!! OH Wonder!! And then your lovely magazine came along sending me to the heights of hysterical competition with the hubby for equal reading time!

I hope you all stand in a circle and pat yourselves on your respective (albeit respectable) backs at making a convert to sci fi. [SF!] When you are done congratulating yourselves, please send your requirement sheet etc. SASE enclosed. [Done!]

Again, heartfelt thanks.

Yours in penitence for years of neglect,

Laura Hulka
Grass Valley CA

Matrimony is a blessed estate when a husband can bring so much happiness to a wife.

—Isaac Asimov

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Dear Mr. Scithers and Dr. Asimov,

With much trepidation I approach the typewriter and write this letter. Dr. Asimov achieved personal demigod status years ago, and the thought that the Master of Science Fiction might actually read this letter boggles the mind. Here goes.

The magazine, of course, lives up to the standards one expects from anything associated with Asimov. Most of the stories are real gems, and I especially like the pun shorts and Martin Gardner's puzzles. Keep (at least) one of each in every issue. Although I feel Barry B. Longyear's stories are good, I have reservations about the plausibility of the "circus planet" background. The fact that a circus ship crashlands on a planet does not mean that the circus will be the basis of the planet's culture. Perhaps I am not giving him enough license, but I still suggest that he concentrate on making the Momus stories more humorous ("The Quest" was fabulous); or better yet, write different stories entirely.

By far the best thing about *Isaac Asimov's SF Magazine* is its encouragement of budding young writers (of which I am one, or hope to be.) Please send me a copy of your story needs and format guidelines [Done!] I have enclosed the required envelope. Thank you.

Sincerely yours,

Steven Mulroy
Gulf Breeze FL

Remember, budding young writers must work their buds off. It doesn't come easy.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Mr. Scithers and Dr. Asimov,

The new issue—October 1979 (whole no. 20)—came in Saturday's mail, and once again I am forced to admit it was one hell of a joy to read.

The cover by George Barr caught my eye right off (after all, a dinosaur in a space suit isn't something one runs into every day).

The ace story in the issue was "The Homecoming" by Barry B. Longyear. Mr. Longyear seems to get better with every appearance in *IA'sfm*. Please try to find out if he plans to write any full-length novels.

"Mandalay" by John M. Ford was the (in my opinion) second story, "A Day in Mallworld" by Somtow Sucharitkul ran third, and "Iron Man, Plastic Ships" by L. E. Modesitt, Jr. placed fourth.

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As I said at the start, number 20 was a joy. Your next Hugo is surely on the way. I remain

Yours truly,

Joseph E. May, Jr.
Sanford FL

We can't absolutely rely on Hugos, you know; only if those who vote have good taste—like thee and me.

—Isaac Asimov

Sirs:

You are to be complimented on the witty and eccentric nature of *IA'sfm.* In these days of the "relevant" SF crowd it is good to have stories that one can again merely enjoy.

Not to say that the stories in *IA'sfm* are simple entertainment (albeit—just what is so wrong with that I have yet to discern), rather, you have managed to infuse the tried and true methods of the past with a new vibrancy. You have a gem of a magazine, which is bringing a return to humor and disinterested scepticism in the genre.

I enclose a sase for your manuscript format; if it is not too much trouble would you please post a copy? [No trouble at all.]

Thanking you for your time and trouble, I remain

Cordially Yours

Emile Wanketé

Witty and eccentric is just right. George and Shawna supply the wit and I do the eccentric part.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Sir:

Congratulations on being the greatest thing to happen to science fiction since the birth of The Good Doctor Asimov himself (which event will undoubtedly become a national holiday in the future, given his growing throng of followers). The editorial taste which you display in each issue is certainly directly proportional to Isaac's talent, inversely proportional to his modesty, and light years above all of your competitors in the sci-fi field. [SF, *please*!]

However, given Doctor Asimov's unquestionably good looks, I think it is a shame to limit him to a few humble appearances per

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monthly issue. Where are the T-shirts, posters, and other memorabilia we need to proudly present the Master of Science Fiction to the rest of the world? As I am sure that a great market for such items exists, I anxiously await their appearance in the advertising pages of future issues. Don't let us down now!

Sincerely,

Tim Palucka
32 Rostock St.
Pittsburgh PA 15212

Nobody will want to celebrate January 2. Everyone will have a hangover.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Mr. Scithers,

I just put down the September issue of *IA'sfm,* and I'd like to commend you on the increasing quality of the publication. I was especially moved by Barry B. Longyear's "Enemy Mine"; it was simply beautiful. I also tremendously enjoyed the article "On the Fundamental Mystery of Physics" by Dr. Rothman. It was clear, concise, and fascinating! Made me overstay my lunch hour this afternoon, much to my boss's displeasure. The last few issues have been great as well, especially Fred Pohl's "Mars Masked" and "The Cool War."

Your policy of encouraging new writers has made me very thankful—years ago I considered trying on some stories for size, but it has been your publication more than anything that has been the cause of my shift from vague intention to serious (and, alas! ceaseless) work.

One question—it may be stupid, but if one writes under a pseudonym, how does one cash the check? [The check is made out in the author's real name.]

Sincerely,

Alan Oehler

I liked Rothman's article a great deal myself. I wish I knew physics the way he does. He writes well, too. And best of all, he's a very nice guy.

—Isaac Asimov

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Dear Editor and Editorial Director,

Horrible error. I passed off the first copy of your mag with a "so Asimov's decided to become SF's first conglomerate. Well, he ain't getting my money."

Last week, in a rage to read something, I bought both *IA'sfm* and *IA'sfam*. Now I scour the thrift shops and used book establishments to find past issues. I am nothing if not cheap.

Good writing. New authors and old. Broad spectrum of SF. Isaac sweet-talking every female letter writer. And you are actively seeking manuscript submissions.

You know, then, what the enclosed self-addressed and stamped envelope is for. [Yes, indeed!]

Do it to it, for I fear I bud.

Sincerely,

Charles Griffin
720 Burgoyne Dr.
Fayetteville NC 28304

Horrible error indeed. Where is that good old-fashioned FAITH?
—Isaac Asimov

Dear Mr Scithers:

It is with mixed feeling that I submit my latest manuscript, "The Message," for your consideration. On one hand, as a previous contributor (April 1979) I feel a sense of commitment to follow through on your encouragement to send along further works. Yet on the other hand . . .

On the other hand, I am perplexed, bewildered, and outraged at Mr. Pohl's story, "The Cool War" which appeared in the August 1979 issue. Following publication of my story, I urged my friends to go out and subscribe to *IA'sfm,* and some did. Now I am almost ashamed to have made that suggestion, in light of material that gets published therein.

You have done so much for the new and almost-new writers in the field. Barry B. Longyear is a gem which (who?) glistens brilliantly in every issue in which he is featured. He is an excellent role model to follow.

I also appreciate that Mr. Pohl is a respected and renowned writer of science fiction, but does that qualify him (or you as publisher) to use such offensive language within a dismal story to preach about allegedly declining mores and moral values in today's society?

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(I won't even mention how you added insult to injury by supplanting the secondmost enjoyable section of your magazine, your letters, in order to accommodate Mr. Pohl's story.)

Yet, it is also my feeling that one expresses stupidity more than anger by shutting off potential dialogue. Thus, this is more than just a letter to the editor, more than just a submission. As always, I thank you for your time and consideration. I remain,

Sincerely yours,

Eric Loranger
Detroit MI

Fred's story was strong material, no doubt, and not everyone's cup of tea, but ask yourself—what was he trying to say? Forget the language and get to the core.

—Isaac Asimov

In addition, we want to apologize for not copy-editing this installment as well as we should. It's not our intention to use language quite that strong when we (and the authors) can avoid doing so.

—George H. Scithers

Dear Dr. Asimov,

I am the fortunate possessor of the very first edition of *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* and every issue thereafter.

Recently, I reread your editorial in that first edition.

I would like to compliment you on keeping faithfully a promise you made then: "We are concentrating on the shorter lengths, and there will be no serials."

It is distinctly irritating to start a story, become interested, then find that you have to wait a month or two to finish it.

Better, if you have a long story which is that good, to publish it entirely in one issue even if that means holding up some shorter works for inclusion in the next.

So, thanks, congratulations on the fine variety and content of stories in each edition, best wishes for continued success, and by all means keep up the puns.

Cordially,

E. P. Harvey
Davenport IA

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Well, it's not all roses, you know. We hate to give up superlative stories too long for us. Sometimes we print excerpts (after a fashion) and this displeases some readers.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear George,

I'm writing to let the *IA'sfm* readership know about the Science Fiction Writers of America (SFWA) and what it does. Since your magazine is encouraging new writers, perhaps a word from the new Membership Chairman (that's—ahem—me) would be informative . . .

SFWA is an organization of *professional science fiction writers.* Active membership is limited to people who have *published professionally* (not just sold) at least three short pieces of science fiction (or fantasy) or at least one book-length work in the genre. Affiliate membership is open to anyone who has *sold* one story. If any of you readers think you fall into either of these two categories, and would like to join, please write me at the address below for an application. A self-addressed stamped envelope wouldn't hurt. I also answer queries.

Now there are benefits, of course. As an active member, you nominate and vote in the Nebula Awards, receive all SFWA's publications including our official organ, the *SFWA Bulletin,* with its market reports and other useful stuff, and our unofficial, in-house publication, the *SFWA Forum,* as well. SFWA also helps its members in many other ways too numerous to mention here. Affiliate members get the *Bulletin* but not the *Forum,* and have fewer privileges, but it's a good way to get a foot in the door of the organization while waiting to accumulate enough professional credits to become an Active Member.

The cost of active membership is $40 per year—well worth it, and if you're a professional writer, tax-deductible too—and that of affiliate membership is $25 per year plus a one-time charge of $7.50. The organization is also open to science fiction and fantasy professional artists, who may join in both categories. Professionals in other areas, related to the field, such as agents and editors, can become affiliate members.

I know there are a lot of prospective writers reading this, so—good luck to all of you, and I'll be here to handle your membership application when you make that magical sale.

Somtow Sucharitkul
3428 South Stafford Street
Arlington VA 22206

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Always of interest to us are comments on the magazine: how well are we being distributed on the newsstands? What are we doing that we shouldn't? What are we neglecting that we should do? (If we're doing something right, it's okay to mention that too, of course . . .)

—George H Scithers

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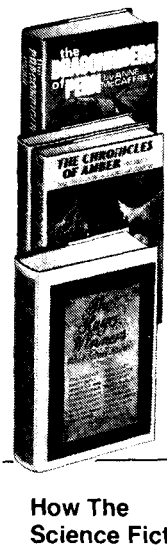

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